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Contents

STR 2/1 (Summer 2011) 39-51

Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture

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> "For it is certain that our Moses is the fountain and the father of all the prophets and sacred books, that is, of heavenly wisdom and eloquence."[1]

Preaching—at least in its expository form—is an oral exercise of theological exegesis set within a particular (liturgical) context. That is not all to be said of preaching, of course, but among the numerous discussions of theological exegesis it seems strange that few scholars have been willing to imagine the Christian pulpit as an arena where the same questions and concerns have long been at play. The Christian preacher who desires to work his way either through a book of the Bible (a lectio continua approach such as John Chrysostom, Augustine, Calvin, and others), or at the least be faithful to a particular text in preaching, faces all of the main questions the academic writer of theological exegesis will face. How do we as a Christian church read this particular text? What questions arise from it? What is the place of this text in the various horizons in which we must read it: original/textual, canonical, ecclesial, historical, liturgical? Why would God have this particular text preserved to be read and heard by his people? What role in the "divine drama" do we play, and what impact might that have upon our hearing and acting upon this text? But these are not questions the preacher asks in theory. He must, every week, stand and address a concrete expression of Christ's body on earth and answer (even if not explicitly) these concerns. And more than this, the preacher has a burden most academics do not have in their musings and books: the preacher has to be interesting.

This article is a retrospective in some ways. I spent considerable time looking at Deuteronomy in an academic setting, and then upon my move to the pulpit I soon undertook the task of preaching through Deuteronomy in the evening services. Standing in front of a congregation whose concerns and struggles I knew—from struggles in marriage to personal addictions, and from grief over loss to joy over blessings—provided a new context for reading Deuteronomy. And my general

1. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (*Luther's Works*, vol.9, St. Louis: Concordia House, 1960), 6.

conviction (undefended, I suppose) was that Deuteronomy must be able to address the Christian church as it actually is: not, as Lewis describes, the "Church as [the demonic powers] see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners";[2] nor, what is the luxury of academics, the "church" as a vague or generalized entity. But the church as she stands, gathered on any given Sunday in any given Christian church—the "church as a hospital" as old preachers would say. In what follows I do not offer a defense of Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture, nor do I attempt to answer all the questions associated with such a proposal. Much will have to be assumed or simply touched upon. I offer instead a suggestion—a way into the preaching of Deuteronomy in its integrity as Christian Scripture. The book stands as "the heartbeat of the OT,"[3] and its neglect in Christian pulpits and the general faith and practice of the church means that we are neglecting a vitally important work.

A Dying Man to Dying Men

"I preached as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men." (Richard Baxter)

Deuteronomy is by and large a book of preaching. This is true whether one conceives Deuteronomy as a kind of constitution, or as a variant of a covenant form (or both, or neither). The editorial structure in Deut 1–30, given by the narrator, comes straightforwardly as three oral sermons given by Moses the dying prophet as the people stand on the cusp of the land promised to their fathers. The editor enters the stage at the outset of the work only to introduce the setting and then the first sermon, much as one might introduce a great public speaker needing no introduction: you say quickly what must be said, and then hide behind the curtain. For the largest part of Deuteronomy the editor's role is quiet, but important: largely because of the editor we know that (literarily or rhetorically) we are reading the final sermons of Moses as the people are set to enter Yhwh's land to possess it. The editor will reintroduce himself and play a stronger role after the three sermons are given, as the book traces the move from oral word to written scroll.[4] The survival of these sermons as part of the Torah, and the people's life in the land after Moses presents the themes governing the final chapters before the death of Moses is narrated. Deuteronomy as a book becomes "the means by which the Moab covenant will be realized in future generations of Israel."[5]

But the framing of the book by the death of Moses is important to remember for the reader and perhaps especially for the preacher of Deuteronomy. The setting just "beyond the Jordan" is given by the editor in 1:1–5 (though the exact location

2. C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5.

3. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1.

4. See the work of Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

5. J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2002), 437.

is uncertain). Such sets the stage for our reading in 1:37 of the fact that Moses will die without entering the land. Moses stands up in front of the people on the very verge, as though their feet were wet at the Jordan's edge, and preaches to them. But he will not cross the river with them. Moses traces the rebellion and movement of the people from Horeb (Sinai) up to the present moment (chs. 1–3) and then, concluding the movement to where the people stand now, we read again of Moses being forbidden from entering the land (3:23–29). The latter extended statement of Moses' impending death forms the turning point into the preaching that begins in earnest at 4:1. The fact of Moses' not entering the land with the people is repeated in 4:21, and then frames the conclusion of the book: from Moses' confession of his age and weakness (along with yet another reminder of the word forbidding him to enter) in 31:2f. to the encomium at his death in 34:1–12. Even the great Song of Moses in chs. 32–33 are introduced by the Lord saying to Moses, "Behold, the days approach when you must die." (31:14)

In all, the editor and the framing of the work makes plain to the reader that we are holding, as it were, the final sermons of a dying preacher urging the people in how they are to live as they are now to cross over into Yhwh's land. Thomas Mann notes:

> [T]he effect of the repeated references to Moses' imminent death is to emphasize not so much why Moses may not enter as that he may not enter. Particularly in the opening chapters, the references impress upon Moses' audience that these are Moses' final words of instruction. . . . Thus the greatest significance of Deuteronomy as a book derives from its configuration as the narrative of Moses' farewell address, the address that constitutes his last will and testament to the new generation of Israel, the people who wait "beyond the Jordan" for the fulfilment of the promise.[6]

Deuteronomy is an ancient illustration, in the narrative frame, of a "passionate preacher"[7] delivering his final sermons: preaching as a dying man to dying men. We do not confront any of the laws in Deuteronomy as a part of a bald "legal codex". We confront them as preached by the dying prophet to the people on the cusp of the land.[8] (This is true even of the lengthy section of laws, the most difficult portion for the preacher.)

The consequence for the cooperative reader, and then the Christian preacher, is an urgency to the book. Not only do we find an authority given to the sermons by virtue of coming from Moses, the man of God, but these are his last sermons.

6. Thomas Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 146. His emphasis.

7. Mann, 147.

8. More broadly conceived as embedded in the larger narrative-form of the Pentateuch, see James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). But this is easily accommodated: the laws in Deuteronomy come as sermons, of which we read as set within the narrative (whether of Deuteronomy or the whole of the Pentateuch, or indeed beyond).

The preacher picking up Deuteronomy cannot afford to preach the book as though it were meant to be a "take it or leave it" document from the ancient Near East: such would belie the text as we have it, and in fact lose the function of the book in its intended role of forming the people of God as they live in the land of promise. The manner of preaching Deuteronomy must fit its content: as an urgent appeal to the people of God to walk in a manner worthy of the calling they have received. In this regard, Moses is put forward as a model of what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls for all Christian preachers:

> The preacher does not just say things with the attitude of 'take it or leave it'. . . . He is not giving a learned disquisition of a text, he is not giving a display of his own knowledge; he is dealing with these living souls and he wants to move them, to take them with him, to lead them to the truth. That is his whole purpose. So if this element is not present, whatever else it may be, it is not preaching.[9]

The Law in Deuteronomy: Works Righteousness?

The great urgency with which Moses stands as the preacher—and which the Christian preacher is bound to reflect—comes with the correlative call of obedience and faithfulness to Yhwh. Urgency in the narrative framing, and the sermons themselves, demand something of the listener. As Thomas Mann states it, speaking of the first speech in particular but applicable to the whole:

> In fact, the basic purpose of [the editor's] narration. . . is to lead up to the "Great Commandment" [Deut 6:6] that Yahweh as the covenant lord places upon Israel, the covenant people. Ultimately, the telling of the story [of Deuteronomy] demands that the audience either accept or reject this Great Commandment, and the covenant itself. Thus listening to the story cannot be (from the redactor's point of view) a passive act; it demands a response. One cannot listen to the story and simply conclude that it is interesting, or even that it is profound. After hearing the story, one must respond in either of two ways: "Because of this story, I accept the covenant," or, "Despite this story, I reject the covenant.". . . The significance of the narration in Deuteronomy is eviscerated if this demand for responsibility is ignored.[10]

Yet the demand for responsibility, the very point of the urgency, comes with a particular question in Christian theology and preaching: is the responsibility and acceptance of the covenant coherent with the gospel of grace?

In my experience the greatest (theoretical) challenge to preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture is the old question about whether or not Deuteronomy espouses a form of works-righteousness: in some manner an earning of saving or

9. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 92.
10. Mann, 147.

justifying righteousness by means of individual or corporate works, rather than by grace through faith.[11] Some, even recently, have suggested that the ratio or plan of Deuteronomy was, in God's providence, to provide a standard far too high for any to attain (Law) in order that they might flee for refuge (Gospel).[12] In this case a preaching of Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture becomes a matter of making Deuteronomy a foil for the "true" Christian message of salvation sola gratia. Or, to put it bluntly, one no longer preaches Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture; one preaches some other text or idea (a particular perspective on Paul, for instance), which Deuteronomy is made to serve.

Many things would need to be said in such a large question, but the view that Yhwh in Deuteronomy lays out a law so demanding that none can keep it runs directly opposite the concluding sermon (which is the rhetorical high-point of the three sermons), where we read:

> 30:11–14 For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Some have divorced this entirely from the rest of Deuteronomy as a later (and inconsistent) addition, while others have found ways to dismiss it or postpone it as though Moses is here speaking to a future people rather than the present—the kind of false dilemma nowhere else present, I would argue, in the rhetoric of Deuteronomy.[13] But taken as tied to the rhetorical situation of 30:15–16, the meaning is not in fact very subtle: the call of faithfulness that is "set before you today" cannot be set aside as mysterious or too difficult to discover or accomplish, even if the concern is patently not a "perfection" according to the Law. As Christopher Wright says on this text:

11. E.g., Matthias Köckert, "Das nahe Wort. Zum entscheidenden Wandel des Gesetzesverständnisses im Alten Testament," *Theologie und Philosophie* 60 (1985), 496–519.

12. In various forms, see: J. G. Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); and the essay (more concerned with theological conclusions than sound exegesis) by Bryan D. Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14 in Biblical Theological Development: Entitlement to Heaven Foreclosed and Proffered," in *The Law is Not of Faith* (eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, D. VanDrunen; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 109–46.

13. For the former, see (e.g.) A. Rofé, "The Covenant in the Land of Moab (Deuteronomy 28:69–30:20): Historico-literary, Comparitive, and Formcritical Considerations," *Das Deuteronomium: Enstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft* (ed. N. Lohfink; Louvain: Louvain Univ. Press, 1985), 310–20; H. Cunliffe-Jones, *Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 160. For the latter, see (e.g.) Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 182ff. For fuller interaction with Barker, see Ryan O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2009), 98–101.

> [The law] is not, therefore, impossibly idealistic, impracticable, unachievable. . . The idea that God deliberately made the law so exacting that nobody would ever be able to live by it belongs to a distorted theology that tries unnecessarily to gild the gospel by denigrating the law. The frequent claims by various psalmists to have lived according to God's law are neither exaggerated nor exceptional. They arise from the natural assumption that ordinary people can indeed live in a way that is broadly pleasing to God and faithful to God's law, and that they can do so as a matter of joy and delight. This is neither self-righteousness nor a claim to sinless perfection, for the same psalmists are equally quick to confess their sin and failings, fully realizing that only the grace that could forgive and cleanse them would likewise enable them to live again in covenant obedience. Obedience to the law in the OT, as has been stressed repeatedly, was not the means of achieving salvation but the response to a salvation that was already experienced.[14]

Or as B. Cranfield states concerning Deut 30:

> They do not have to inquire after the will of a harsh or capricious tyrant. They have received the revelation of the merciful will of the God whose prior grace is the presupposition of all He requires. Essentially what He asks is that they should give Him their hearts in humble gratitude for His goodness to them and in generous loyalty to their fellows.[15]

The Torah stands in Deuteronomy as that way of life by which the people of God shall live in the land he is graciously giving to them. And this gift of Yhwh's land is not based on the people's righteousness (9:4–5) or their might and power (7:7–8), or in anything in them whatsoever. The gift of the land is due to the promise of Yhwh to the fathers, and Yhwh's faithfulness to his word (7:6–8). Nor does Deuteronomy suggest that the people of God possess some inherent ability to keep the law apart from Yhwh's prior work within them (the old Augustinian/Pelagian controversy)—it appears the opposite (29:3; 30:6).[16] If we remain within Deuteronomy, the ratio does not lie in the impossibility of the law to be kept; it lies in the exhortation to "choose life" by faithfulness to Yhwh. The summary of William Tyndale in his preface to Deuteronomy is in this case far better:

> This is a book worthy to be read in, day and night, and never to be out of hands. For it is the most excellent of the books of Moses. It is also

14. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 290. Cf. O'Dowd, op. cit.. In different forms, see the older study by W. R. Roehrs, "Covenant and Justification in the O. T.," *CTM* 35 (1954), 583–602; Georg Braulik, "Law as Gospel: Justification and pardon According to the Deuteronomic Torah," *Interpretation*, 38 (1984), 5–14.

15. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 523.

16. So Peter Diepold: "Die Reälitat des Bundes ermöglicht es, Indikativ und Imperativ nach beiden Seiten hin voll zu entfalten, so daß der Indikativ nicht zur billigen Gnade wird, aber auch so, daß der Imperativ nicht zur Werkgerechtigkeit entartet." *Israels Land* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), 100; see pp. 96–102.

> easy and light, and a very pure Gospel, that is to wit, a preaching of faith and love: deducing the love to God out of faith, and the love of a man's neighbour out of the love of God. Herein also thou mayest learn right meditation or contemplation, which is nothing else save the calling to mind, and a repeating in the heart, of the glorious and wonderful deeds of God, and of his terrible handling of his enemies and merciful entreating of them that come when he calleth them, which thing this book doth, and almost nothing else.[17]

Love in Deuteronomy—both love of God and neighbor—always arises as the faithful response to the gracious calling and redemption of Yhwh. Love is that act demanded by the covenant already graciously established. Or put another way, the people are not constituted as Yhwh's own by means of the Torah, but are given the Torah because they have already been constituted as Yhwh's when he brought them out of Egypt.[18]

We see this clearly in the lists of the blessings and the curses (ch. 28), a standard "danger" area for preachers who want (rightly) to avoid a form of "health and wealth" preaching. But in Deuteronomy the blessings and curses are theological, not merely a "do this, and get that" approach to life. The blessings in every case are those things that are fitting the people who have Yhwh, the true and living God, as their God: fruitfulness, peace, safety, victory, and all the things that were not to be sought by turning to other deities or nations. The curses, on the other hand, are those things that are fitting the people who have rejected Yhwh, who now stands as their enemy. There is an important disjunction between the two: the blessings come by virtue of the covenant promise, not by the works of the people; but the curses come by virtue of the rejection. The people must "choose life," but do not thereby earn life. They either enjoy the grace offered in the covenant by faithfulness, or they reject it and perish. Again, here is Wright:

> [A]lthough it is clear that if the curses happen, they will come as deserved punishment, there is no corresponding sense in which the blessings can be earned as some kind of reward. The whole thrust of Deuteronomy would protest at such an idea. Israel is bluntly warned to make no equations between military or material success and its own merits. . . . Rather, God's blessing on God's people is already there in the very fact that they are God's people at all. It is intrinsic to the promise to Abraham and to the covenant relationship. Blessing is the prior reality of God's grace. It is there to be enjoyed, but can be enjoyed only by living in God's way in the

17. William Tyndale, "A Prologue into the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy," in *Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, vol. 1 (E. Palmer: London, 1831), 49–50. Cp.

18. Patrick D. Miller: "The single ground for identifying the Lord and explaining why that one claims to be 'your God' is the clause 'who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'." Patrick D. Miller, "The Most Important Word: The Yoke of the Kingdom," *Iliff Review* 41 (1984), 20. Cf. Deut 29:25.

> land God is giving them. Obedience, therefore, like faith, is the means of appropriating God's grace and blessing, not the means of deserving it.[19]

The basic theological point is not hard to find for the Christian preacher. It is simply what we see stated by Richard Baxter:

> [L]et 'Deserved' be written on the door of hell, but on the door of heaven and life, 'The free gift.'[20]

Law as Delight in Deuteronomy

Yet we can say even more about the theological context of the Torah in Deuteronomy. Contrary to the notion of the Torah as being a "burden" from which the people of God were meant to feel a desire to be freed, the Torah is situated in Deuteronomy as exactly what the Psalmists declared: a delight and a joy. On the one hand, the law stands as the necessary response to Yhwh's gracious acts in salvation. But the true setting of the Law is given full flourish in the description of the time in which the book of the Law was to be read:

> 31:10 And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before Yhwh your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing."

The instructions designate a particular week in a particular year within the liturgical calendar of Israel as the true setting for the reading of the law. But it is strange to see how often commentators have missed the theological significance of this setting. Christenson, for instance, thinks this time was chosen simply because it provided a better "educational" setting "when the people were more exempt than usual from the concerns of employment."[21] Most simply do not go beyond the statement that a time is given, not asking why (the qua without the quia). But in Deuteronomy both the year of release and the Feast of Booths are prominent not for educational purposes, but for the symbolism of Yhwh's provision, and a joy in Yhwh's provision.

The year of release was that year in which all creditors released what was lent to their neighbors; all who were reduced to indentured servanthood were released; and so the poor were cared for. Yhwh promised prosperity and provision, and so the year of release was interpreted in Deut 15 as a sign of faith in that provision. And with the release of slaves or servants, the point of redemption is even more explicit: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today." (15:15) In

19. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 280–81.

20. Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* (1650; Repr., Christian Focus Publ., 1998), 66.

21. D. L. Christenson, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 766. Similarly S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (3rd ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 336.

Deuteronomy the year of release stands for the provision of Yhwh past, present and future, and his redeeming work for their sake. To place the reading of the Torah during this year was not accidental. The year embodied the grace and provision of Yhwh that was to shape the lives of the people of God in return (to provide for the poor, as Yhwh had promised to provide for them; to free the slaves, as Yhwh had freed them when slaves). The Law is set in a context of grace and provision.

But the directions are even more specific: within the year of release, the week for re-reading is to be the Feast of Booths (cf. 16:13–15). The Feast of Booths brought to a conclusion the three feasts of the liturgical year at the final ingathering of the last harvest of wine. The description for the feast in Deuteronomy drips with the joy to be associated by everyone on the occasion, both those who had land and property and those who were dependent upon others:

> You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to Yhwh your God at the place that Yhwh will choose, for Yhwh your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.

The Feast of Booths was the "feast par excellence" for Israel, called by the rabbis "the time of our rejoicing."[22] The placement of the Torah as to be read during the year that embodied the grace and provision of Yhwh, and in the week given over more than any other to joy in Yhwh's presence, offers in ritual the theology of Law in Deuteronomy: given by Yhwh for joy and happiness, in the context of Yhwh's redemptive and fatherly care.

Liturgical and ritual settings have been given rather more attention in recent years, in part through the work of Charles Taylor. But many biblical commentators, and many (especially American evangelical) preachers, have yet to take much notice. James K. A. Smith argues:

> We are embodied, affective creatures who are shaped and primed by material practices or liturgies that aim our hearts to certain ends, which in turn draw us to them in a way that transforms our actions by inscribing in us habits or dispositions to act in certain ways.[23]

Applied to the setting of the Law in Deut 31:10, the ritual or liturgy was to shape and aim the hearts of the people of God to certain ends: to view God's Law in a

22. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 158.

23. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 133. Or elsewhere: "Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a telos that we desire. It's not so much that we're intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a precognitive level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons. It is not primarily our minds that are captivated but rather our imaginations that are captured, and when our imagination is hooked, we're hooked. . . . Those visions of the good life that capture our heart have thereby captured our selves and begin to draw us toward them, however implicitly or tacitly." Ibid., 54.

particular context. And so, being shaped in such a way, would inscribe the habits or dispositions to act in certain ways—namely, by keeping the Law of Yhwh.

The most proper setting for a preaching of the Law (which is what Deuteronomy and preaching Deuteronomy would be), is a liturgical and ritual setting in which the people of God, standing in his presence, joyously celebrate God's redemption and provision. Or more simply: in worship. That is not to say that Deuteronomy cannot be studied or preached elsewhere (cf. Deut 6:4–9!), but it's proper theological place stands as a preaching of the Law of God to the redeemed and joyous people of God. In classical, and especially classical Reformed liturgies (such as the Book of Common Prayer), the sermon/homily ordinarily stands after the confession of sin and absolution, and prior to the joyous feasting of the Eucharist. In this regard, the preaching of Deuteronomy in that setting would be a manner of cooperating with the theology of the book itself. And, on the negative side, the neglect of placing Deuteronomy in such a liturgical and ritual setting (for whatever pragmatic reasons), and remaining content to have it read away from or outside that setting, will itself shape and prime us, and neglect to aim our hearts at what the narrator places in front of us in Moses' call.

Deuteronomy and the Good Life

"[H]appiness is pretty much a kind of living well and acting well."[24]

Deuteronomy inculcates the simple claim that it is with Yhwh their God that Israel has to do, and their happiness or futility in life will depend upon the way in which that truth is acknowledged (or not) in their social and individual existence. The Torah is not merely a set of laws or legal constitution, though they take somewhat the form of the latter in Deuteronomy. The Torah stands to offer a view of the "good life," of happiness in its richest sense.[25] Peter Vogt has convincingly argued for a view of Deuteronomy in its final form as inculcating a life in which Yhwh is supreme in all things.[26] One could, in theory, deduce this from the theological claim of the covenant formula: "I will be your God, and you will be my people," standing at the core of the Torah. But in Deuteronomy the preacher is not content to allow people to deduce the preeminence of Yhwh and, thus, his Torah. Rather, the fact of the covenant moves throughout the society, in corporate structures and individual ethics to announce Yhwh's sovereignty over all things.

24. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (tr. Roger Crisp; Cambridge: CUP, 2000), §I.8.

25. "'Life' here [in Deut] denotes 'happiness', that is to say, life in its fullest sense. . . . The addition of the word 'good' indicates the sense in which 'life' is employed in the book of Deuteronomy: it is the 'good life', i.e., a full life, in brief—a happy life." M. Weinfield, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 307–08.

26. "The supremacy of Yahweh thus is at the very heart of the theology and ideology of Deuteronomy. Equally important, however, is the role of Torah, because it teaches the means by which Yahweh's supremacy is lived out by his people." Peter T. Vogt, *Deuteronomic Theology and the Significance of Torah: A Reappraisal* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 229.

The king is reduced to a figure bound to copy the law and live according to it, as a model Israelite; the priests are to serve and teach the law; the judges (elders) are to enforce the law; and the prophets are to be measured by the law (16:18–18:22).[27] At every turn the people face a fundamental reality: it is with Yhwh their God that they have to do.

Many have characterized the projection of a society in Deuteronomy as "utopian" whether they consider the projection to be done in prospect or retrospect. But far better is the characterization in terms of the way things ought to be, as Vogt:

> Deuteronomy is, in a sense, "eschatological" in its outlook. That is, it envisages a society as it ought to be.[28]

At bottom Deuteronomy exerts the claim of the covenant, that Yhwh is the God of his people. Such a truth means particular things given the nature of Yhwh who set his name among them. The social consequences and individual consequences, as well as liturgical and ritual practices to aim the hearts of the people to love and fear Yhwh, are all given their place so that (rhetorically) the people who now stand on the cusp of the land of promise will form a nation that is as it ought to be.

Preaching the laws can be heavy going. Some, such as the food laws, are explicitly repealed upon the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. But preaching the holiness of the people of God flows very easily from such laws, and takes very little imagination to connect to the life of the church in the world.[29] Others of the laws, embedded as they are in Ancient Near Eastern society (and sometimes carrying nuances and significance we have yet to fully discover), can make preaching Deuteronomy difficult and, truth be told, in danger of being dull. But in every case the law stands as an application of Yhwh's claim upon Israel, and their reminder that in everything it is with the Lord their God that they have to do. Richard Rogers, an English Puritan, was once told, "I like you and your company very well, but you are so precise." "Sir," replied the preacher, "I serve a precise God."[30] Such a view is not far from what we read of the truth of Yhwh in Deuteronomy. And the promised result is happiness: not a smiling sense of well-being, but a life lived according to its created and redeemed purpose, and so bringing the

27. See Vogt, op. cit., 204ff. See also the essay by Patrick D. Miller, "The Good Neighborhood: Identity and Commubnity through the Commandments," in Miller, *Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 51–67.

28. Ibid., 231.

29. See the classic study by Mary Douglas, where the food laws announce in every day life the holiness to which the people of God are called: "holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 67. Again, understood in light of the shaping influence of rituals and liturgies, the food laws in fact make rather fine material for the Christian preacher to take up.

30. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 5.

blessings of the covenant—having Yhwh as one's God, and being one of his people, with all the blessings contained in it.

Conclusions

It was no accident that Jesus repudiated the temptations of Satan in the wilderness by citations of Deuteronomy. (I once had a class on the Torah with the cheeky title: "The Pentateuch: or, What Jesus Would Do.) Deuteronomy stands at the headwaters of biblical theology, life, and practice. So likewise it is hard to imagine Paul's exhortation to Timothy regarding the usefulness of "all Scripture" (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures) for the Christian church to exclude Deuteronomy (2 Tim 3:16f). Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture ought to lead to a discovery and presentation of the glory, the grace, and the calling of the one determining fact for the people of God in any generation: it is with the Lord our God that we have to do. The Law is set within that truth, and the fundamental demand of Yhwh for every successive generation is to love the Lord their God with all one's heart, soul, and strength. We are told of the saving work and fatherly care of Yhwh for his people, by Moses the old and dying preacher. And then we are told what life ought to be like for the people of God in a particular cultural and historical setting: a love of neighbor that shapes rules of war in an ancient near eastern context; love of God determining the proper view of priests, prophets, and kings; proper treatment of criminals, witnesses, trials, the guilty (among the people of God), and due care for creation all are tied together in Deuteronomy as loving God and loving neighbor. And all arise because God first loved and called his people. Deuteronomy, in its bulk, is already preached by its reading—it is a recording and presentation of sermons. Moses stands in the narrative structure of Deuteronomy and in his final words points the people of God to the single greatest fact of their lives: that it is with Yhwh their God that they have to do. That truth invades every corner of their lives, corporately and individually, so that there is not a square inch where the Lord (who redeemed them) does not say, 'It is mine.' As an American Christian it appears rather hard for me to believe that such a call does not need to be made to the people of God today, and applied with wisdom and love for God and neighbor to the body of Christ.

Deuteronomy stands as the theological heart-beat of the Old Testament. But preaching Deuteronomy today, reading the ancient manner of its rhetoric, the difficult and sometimes confusing laws, the antiquated agricultural or societal specifics, seems a great challenge. But whatever the complexities that arise, the importance of Deuteronomy as preserved and given "for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11) ought to be recovered in Christian pulpits. We stand having seen the grace of God in ways more profound than that generation standing on the cusp of Canaan, or the first readers and then every generation who heard the sermons re-preached at the great and joyous feasts of Israel. No Christian preacher can ignore or should ignore that fact. Placed within

the Christian liturgy, the fact cannot be ignored or missed. Yhwh, who saved his people from the hand of Og and Bashan, went even further and saved them from the power of sin and death. The one who held his people in his strong and tender hands as a father carrying a child (Deut 1:31), out of grace and pity, stretched out the same hands upon a cross for his children's salvation.

These are not facts to be ignored in a Christian preaching of Deuteronomy. They shape the horizon from which we view the whole of the text. But the impact ought to serve to heighten the manifestation of grace, and then to strengthen the necessity to "hear": for if those who heard the Law from Moses were justly punished for their unbelief, and did not enter the "rest" promised, then how shall we escape such a great salvation, of which we have heard from the Son himself (Heb 2:2f., et passim)? The truth that it is with the Lord our God that we have to do stands as the great hope, comfort, and call to faithfulness in the Christian church—and the great cause for judgment for those who would spurn him. The call of Deuteronomy is to live in faith, and by faith, for Yhwh is God of his people, does all for their provision, and his Word is to stand over every aspect of their life. Grace begets gratitude, love requires love in return. And the Christian preacher stands, like Moses, to call with due urgency the redeemed people of God to love and good deeds: to declare the wonder and seriousness of the fact that it is with the Lord their God that they have to do, in all things.