

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

EXPOSITION PAPER:
DEUTERONOMY 6:1-15

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INTRODUCTION

As the climactic renewal and enumeration of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, Deuteronomy contains at its core a cross between an ancient Near Eastern law code and treaty.¹ Within this structure, the laws and treaty stipulations – general (5:1-11:32) and specific (12:1-26:19) – are given pride of place. After the setting and introduction to the covenant (4:44-49), Moses² begins his second sermon (5:1-28:69) with an interpretive restatement of the Decalogue (5:6-21), couched within an extended reflection on the initial law-giving at Horeb and Moses' role as mediator (5:1-33). In the passage at hand (6:1-15), he then transitions to the remainder of the general stipulations (6:1-11:32) with an introductory exhortation (6:1-3), a distillation of the covenant principles (6:4-5), and an extension of these principles to future generations and society (6:6-9), concluding with a warning against forgetfulness and idolatry as the Israelites soon enter the land of Canaan (6:10-15). *In remembrance of and in response to Yahweh's unique faithfulness, Israel must love Yahweh absolutely and exclusively by internalizing, embodying, and teaching covenant faithfulness as they inherit the blessings of the promised land.*

¹ The relevant sections are: Historical Prologue – Deut 1-3; Laws/Treaty Stipulations – chs. 4-26; Document Clause – 27:3; 31:9-13; Blessings – 28:1-14; and Curses – 28:15-68. Gordon J. Wenham proposes this structural approach to the Deuteronomic covenant in *A Guide to the Pentateuch* (vol. 1 of *Exploring the Old Testament*; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 125. The similarities between Deuteronomy and ANE suzerain-vassal treaties are also noted by Eugene E. Carpenter in “Deuteronomy,” in *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (ed. John H. Walton; vol. 1 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 420.

² Throughout this study, I assume Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy. Furthermore, I assume that the passage at hand was originally composed just prior to Moses' death and the subsequent conquest of Canaan. With regards to setting, Carpenter places Moses in the plains of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River in either 1406 or 1229 B.C. The earliest extrabiblical account of the Israelites in Canaan, a stele erected by Merneptah in western Thebes, mentions them already in the land in 1209 B.C (Cf. Carpenter, 420).

INTRODUCTORY EXHORTATION: 6:1-3

Moses begins this passage with an exhortation to keep the general stipulations of the covenant to be discussed in Deuteronomy 6-11. In response to Yahweh's command (recounted at 5:31), Moses teaches the people the "commandments, statutes, and ordinances" (5:31, 6:1; referring to the covenant stipulations)³ so that they will "carry them out in the land" (5:31, 6:1). This transmission of the covenant stipulations from Yahweh to Moses to the Israelites was not meant to achieve a merely epistemic result, but also an ontic one. That is, Moses was not merely teaching them the stipulations so that they would merely know (and do) the right things, but so that they would be the right kind of people, internalizing and embodying the stipulations as they entered the promised land of Canaan. The intended result of the commandments, statutes, and ordinances was holistic covenant faithfulness.

At the heart of the appropriate epistemic and ontic response to the covenant stipulations was the proper fear of Yahweh their God (6:2a), which was to result in a continual obedience for generations upon generations (6:2b),⁴ reflecting the importance of teaching covenant faithfulness to their children.⁵ As the injunctions to "pay attention" and "be careful" (6:3a) indicate, this obedience was also to be careful and deliberate.⁶ The promised results of such continual and careful covenant faithfulness are long life (6:2c) and many descendants (6:2b, 3a) in the bountiful promised land (6:1b, 3b), recalling Yahweh's unique faithfulness to fulfill his promises of land and offspring to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.⁷

³ J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos 5; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 140. On *mitzvah*, *khuqqim*, and *mishpatim*, Eugene H. Merrill notes this as the standard reference to the covenant stipulations as opposed to the Decalogue or the law as a whole (*Deuteronomy* (NAC 4; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 160). Cf. Deut 4:1-8 for an example of how this phrase and its permutations are used as a reference and structural marker.

⁴ Merrill, 161.

⁵ This is the first mention in 6:1-15 of the theme taken up again at 6:7.

⁶ McConville (140) notes the alliteration of *shema'* and *shemar*, describing the cumulative effect as a call to "careful, sustained obedience."

⁷ McConville, 140.

DISTILLATION OF THE COVENANT PRINCIPLES: 6:4-5

Following the brief introduction to the general stipulations (6:1-3), Moses distills the Decalogue, itself an encapsulation of the entire covenant, into just sixteen Hebrew words, providing “the expression of the essence of all God’s person and purposes” (6:4-5).⁸

Named after the first Hebrew word in 6:4 (*shéma*’, “hear, pay attention”), the “Great Shema” has long been regarded as central to Deuteronomy and to Israelite theology and praxis.⁹ However, because of its brevity, the translation of the Shema (particularly 6:4) into English has been the topic of considerable debate. Although the initial imperative and vocative (“pay attention, Israel”) are clear enough, translating the remaining four terms (“Yahweh, our God, Yahweh, one”) into English involves making a decision on the placement of the copulative and the precise translation of *ekhad* as “one” or “alone.”¹⁰

On balance, given the statement’s quasi-poetic brevity, it seems best to render 6:4: “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one.”¹¹ This translation allows for a mediating position between Block’s arguments for rendering *ekhad* as “alone,” emphasizing God’s uniqueness, and Janzen’s arguments for God’s oneness as internal consistency and faithfulness to Israel.¹² Compared to the gamut of Canaanite and other ancient Near Eastern deities, Yahweh was indeed unique,¹³ primarily because of his faithfulness to Israel from the patriarchs (6:3b, 10a),

⁸ Merrill, 162.

⁹ Daniel I. Block claims that “the Shema’ is as close as early Judaism came to the formulation of a creed” (“How many is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5,” *JETS* 47 (2004): 195). Similarly, most commentators note the Shema’s distinctive importance. Cf. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9, revised* (WBC 6a; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 142; McConville, 139-140; Merrill, 162; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (trans. D. Barton; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 64.

¹⁰ These are only two of the numerous proposals for the translation of *ekhad*. See Block, 195-8 for a full discussion.

¹¹ J. Gerald Janzen, “On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5),” *VT* 37 (1987): 280-300; Merrill, 162-3.

¹² See Block, 211-2 and Janzen, 300

¹³ Carpenter, 456; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 177.

through the exodus (6:12), and into the immanent conquest of Canaan (6:1b, 3, 10-11). That “Yahweh is one” is not so much an ontological statement as it is a historical reflection¹⁴ in remembrance of Yahweh’s unique faithfulness to his covenant people.

Therefore, in response to this unique faithfulness, Israel must love Yahweh absolutely (6:5), as seen by the concentric use of *lebab* (“heart,” the inner being, including emotion and intellect), *nephesh* (“soul,” the entire being, including desires), and *me’od* (“strength,” the physical being, including economic and social resources).¹⁵ This is the only proper response to the God who is truly *ekhad* (6:4),¹⁶ comprising the essential principle upon which the entire covenant rested.¹⁷ Related to the previously mentioned fear of Yahweh and obedience to the covenant stipulations (6:1-3), loving Yahweh involves the epistemic/ontic response of internalizing (with the *lebab* and *nephesh*) and embodying (through the *me’od*) covenant faithfulness.

EXTENSION TO FAMILY AND SOCIETY – 6:6-9

The proper love of Yahweh is absolute, permeating not only the entire person (6:5), but also all of life (6:6-9),¹⁸ including the family unit (6:7) and society (6:8-9). Beginning again with the concept of epistemic internalization, Moses commands the Israelites to keep “these words” (referring to the entire covenant through the Shema)¹⁹ on their hearts/minds (6:6). This internalization of the covenant through constant reflection is then to be extended by teaching covenant faithfulness to future generations (6:7a), here described with an unusual

¹⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 394.

¹⁵ I have here conflated the lexical data provided by Block, 203 and Merrill, 164.

¹⁶ Merrill, 164.

¹⁷ McConville, 139.

¹⁸ Block, 204.

¹⁹ McConville, 142; Merrill, 167.

verb (*shanan*) which evokes the imagery of engraving a message into stone.²⁰ Just as Moses is teaching the Israelites the covenant stipulations, they must teach these things to their children through constant repetition and discussion of the faithful covenant lifestyle within the household, reflected through the double merism of 6:7b (sitting/walking; lying down/getting up).²¹

Finally, this commitment to covenant faithfulness was to transcend the household and permeate the entire society (6:8-9). Although the instructions here (to “tie,” “fasten,” and “inscribe” the covenant stipulations on the forearm, forehead, and doorframes, respectively) were taken literally in later Jewish tradition,²² they were probably meant to be interpreted metaphorically.²³ In this case, 6:8 refers to the embodiment of the covenant principles in everyday life, identifying each individual Israelite as a faithful covenant member.²⁴ However, in 6:9 the exhortation to covenant faithfulness is then expanded to the household and the community as “these words” (6:6) are inscribed “on the doorframes of your houses and gates” (6:9).²⁵ In response to Yahweh’s unique faithfulness, the Israelites are to love him absolutely by internalizing (6:6), embodying (6:8-9), and teaching (6:7) covenant faithfulness.

²⁰ Merrill, 167.

²¹ Block, 204; Merrill, 167.

²² This literal interpretation resulted in the *tephillin* and phylacteries, small boxes containing Torah verses (Exod 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21) which were worn on the forehead and forearms. Similarly, 6:9 was interpreted literally, resulting in the *mezuzah*, boxes containing Deut 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 placed on the doorposts of Jewish dwellings. Cf. Merrill, 168.

²³ As argued by McConville (142) and Merrill (168), although McConville does allow for the possibility of a literal reading.

²⁴ Merrill, 168.

²⁵ Block, 204; Merrill, 168.

WARNING AGAINST FORGETFUL IDOLATRY: 6:10-15

However, the proper love of Yahweh is also exclusive, for his uniqueness demands that he be worshipped alone. After distilling the covenant (6:4-5) and extending its essential claim to the family and society (6:6-9), Moses exhorts his audience to eschew all forms of forgetful idolatry. Instead, the Israelites are to love Yahweh exclusively as they inherit the blessings of the promised land, in remembrance of and in response to his unique faithfulness (6:10-15).

The historical context of this passage is especially important for the interpretation of 6:10-11. Moses reminds the Israelites of Yahweh's unique faithfulness by linking the divine promises of land to the patriarchs with the fulfillment of those promises in the immanent conquest and occupation of Canaan.²⁶ The concrete description of the promised land in 6:10b-11 was designed to remind the audience that it was a blessing and a gift from Yahweh in faithful fulfillment of his kingly duties.²⁷ The warning in 6:12 to "be careful" reveals Moses' anxiety that the sudden affluence the Israelites would experience in Canaan might lead them to forget their uniquely faithful God, who had redeemed them from the oppressive hand of the Egyptians and provided for them throughout the wilderness wanderings.²⁸

Therefore, 6:13 contains an intensely covenantal threefold call to the exclusive love of Yahweh alone.²⁹ As part of the proper response to Yahweh's oneness (6:4), the Israelites are to fear only Yahweh, serve only Yahweh, and swear only by Yahweh's name.³⁰ Moses then intensifies the warning even further in 6:14-15 with a rephrasing of the first two commandments (Deut 5:7-10).³¹ On the basis of Yahweh's righteous jealousy and the

²⁶ Christensen, 146; McConville, 143; Merrill, 169.

²⁷ Cf. "the duty of kings in Mesopotamia to build cities as part of incorporating new territory into their kingdom" (McConville, 143).

²⁸ von Rad, 64.

²⁹ Merrill, 171.

³⁰ McConville, 143.

³¹ Merrill, 171.

promised punishment of exile (5:9; 6:15; cf. 28:63; Lev 26:43), the Israelites are to love Yahweh exclusively by completely eschewing all forms of foreign idolatry (6:14).³²

CONCLUSION

As an introduction to the main exposition of the general covenant stipulations (Deut 6-11), Moses begins with an exhortation, calling the Israelites to the proper internalized and embodied response to Yahweh's commands, statutes, and ordinances: covenant faithfulness as they enter the promised land (6:1-3). Then, he presents the distilled essence of the covenant principles in 6:4-5: the demand for the absolute love of Yahweh on the basis of his unique faithfulness. This essential covenant claim is then extended to the family unit and society in 6:6-9 as the Israelites are commanded to internalize, embody, and teach covenant faithfulness to future generations. Finally, in 6:10-15, in anticipation of the conquest of Canaan as a revelation of Yahweh's unique faithfulness to the patriarchs and the nation, the people are sternly warned to eschew all forms of forgetful idolatry and instead to worship Yahweh alone. Therefore, taken as a whole, Deuteronomy 6:1-15 was written to teach its original audience that, *in remembrance of and in response to Yahweh's unique faithfulness, they were to love Yahweh absolutely and exclusively by internalizing, embodying, and teaching covenant faithfulness as they inherited the blessings of the promised land.*

³² McConville, 143; Merrill, 171.

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