

PART ONE

**POISED TO ENTER THE PROMISED LAND
LOOKING BACK & LOOKING FORWARD**

DEUTERONOMY 1:1 – 4:43

Introduction to Deuteronomy 1:1 – 4:43

In his *Deuteronomy* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries 2001, page 18), Walter Brueggemann speaks for many scholars when he writes: ‘Because Deuteronomy as a book reached its final form through a long editorial process designed to keep the book pertinent and responsive to different historical crises, it is not easy to date the book or to identify its origins.’ In regard to this first Part (Moses’ first speech) he concludes that it was written ‘to serve the needs of the exilic community in the sixth century after Jerusalem had been lost and the opinion-makers in the community were deported out of the land’ (page 19). He goes on to write: ‘Scholars incline to regard chapters 1–3 and 29–32 as a literary theological introduction to the entire corpus of the Deuteronomistic History that in its final form includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings’ (page 19).

The Deuteronomistic authors highlight two major themes. Looking back they focus on the main sin that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile: infidelity to the special covenant they have with YHWH. They do so by the way they draw on traditional stories to reconstruct the Wilderness Journey in such a way as to connect the experience of their ancestors with that of the Babylonian exiles who, like their ancestors, are poised to cross over and enter the Promised Land. The exiles in Babylon must listen carefully to Moses’ words, for the lessons he teaches are the lessons they need to learn. When their ancestors believed in YHWH’s purposes for them, and in his power to achieve them – so the story is told – they met with success. When they failed to believe, but chose to rely on themselves, they met with failure. That is why they spent those long years wandering in the wilderness. The exiles are where they are for the same reason.

Looking forward they focus on YHWH’s promise to give them the Promised Land. The offer is secure and YHWH is faithful to his word. Moses insists that the people must listen to YHWH and obey his directions if they want to be secure in the land. The Deuteronomists want their contemporaries to listen to Moses, for their future depends upon it.

These basic lessons of trust and obedience each new generation must learn for itself, if they do not want history to repeat itself.

It would appear that too many hands have been involved in the opening five verses. Verse two appears to be a marginal note that has found its way into the text; verse three is an insertion from writers of the Priestly School; and verse four is a quick reference back to the victories in Transjordan. It may have been added when the books of the Torah were placed in the order in which we now find them, thus providing a link between Deuteronomy and Numbers. Verses one and five give the setting for the whole Book. We are ‘beyond the Jordan in the land of Moab’ (1:5).

Moses’ opening words refer to Horeb (1:6; called ‘Sinai’ by the Priestly School) and he goes on immediately to remind them of the promise that YHWH gave them there. The time has come to ‘go in and take possession of the land’ promised to their ancestors (see pages 34-35 for some of the key texts). The Deuteronomic School always think of this promised land in its most extensive terms, encompassing Syria and stretching in a north-easterly direction as far as the ‘Euphrates’ (compare Genesis 15:18). Verse seven describes ‘the land of the Canaanites’ (1:7) according to its geographic features: ‘the Arabah’ (the depression through which the Jordan flows, the Dead Sea area and stretching down to the Gulf of Aqabah); ‘the hill country’ (the north-south mountain range west of the Jordan); ‘the Shephelah’ (the western slopes from the hill country to the coastal plain); ‘the Negeb’ (the wilderness stretching south from the hill country of Judah to the wilderness of Zin); ‘the seacoast’ (bordering the Mediterranean).

Already some key points have been made: YHWH is ‘our God’ (an expression that occurs 23 times in Deuteronomy) – we are in a special covenant relationship; a link has been made with Horeb (Sinai), but we are no longer there; we are near the Jordan and the Promised Land, but not yet in it; and YHWH is revealing himself and his will to us through Moses, whom he has chosen as the mediator. Note the use of the word ‘law’ (1:5, *tôrâ*) to describe the contents of Deuteronomy.

¹These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan – in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dizahab.

²(By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-barnea from Horeb.)

³In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites just as YHWH had commanded him to speak to them.

⁴This was after he had defeated King Sihon of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan, who reigned in Ash-taroth and in Edrei.

⁵Beyond the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law as follows:

⁶YHWH our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. ⁷Resume your journey, and go into the hill country of the Amorites as well as into the neighbouring regions – the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, and the seacoast – the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.

⁸See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them.”

The Promised Land

In verse eight Moses reminds the people of the promise made to them through their ancestors. We would do well to pause and reflect upon it. When YHWH first revealed himself to Abraham he spoke of ‘land’ – and much more:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

– Genesis 12:1-3

Shortly after, Abraham was in Canaan when:

YHWH appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land”.

– Genesis 12:7

And later:

Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.

– Genesis 13:14-17

And:

YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates”.

– Genesis 15:18

The promise was repeated to Abraham’s son, Isaac. The reason given (in the final verse) is very relevant to the message of Deuteronomy:

Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.

– Genesis 26:3-5

YHWH assured Jacob:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

– Genesis 28:15

And Jacob assured his son, Joseph:

God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, and said to me, ‘I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.’

– Genesis 48:3-4

As he was dying, Joseph said to his brothers:

God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

– Genesis 50:24

When YHWH revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, he said that he had come to redeem Israel from Egypt in order to:

bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

– Exodus 3:8

And later:

I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am YHWH.

– Exodus 6:8

Before leaving Egypt, Moses spoke to the people of the land that YHWH will give you, as he has promised.

– Exodus 12: 25 (also 13:5,11)

On Mount Sinai, YHWH promised:

I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you.

– Exodus 23:31

When YHWH threatened to withdraw his blessing from Israel because of the episode with the golden calf, Moses pleaded with him:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.

– Exodus 32:13

YHWH relented:

Go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’

Exodus 33:1

However, the Exodus generation will not enter the land.

None of the people who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not unreservedly followed me

– Numbers 32:11

It will be their children who will inherit the promise.

I will bring in your little ones, and they shall know the land that you have despised.

– Numbers 14:31

You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess.

– Numbers 33:53

It is to these children that Moses addresses his final testament as he is about to die and as Joshua is about to lead them across the Jordan to the Promised Land.

⁹At that time I said to you, “I am unable by myself to bear you. ¹⁰YHWH your God has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven. ¹¹May YHWH, the God of your ancestors, increase you a thousand times more and bless you, as he has promised you! ¹²But how can I bear the heavy burden of your disputes all by myself?

¹³Choose for each of your tribes individuals who are wise, discerning, and reputable to be your leaders.”

¹⁴You answered me, “The plan you have proposed is a good one.” ¹⁵So I took the leaders of your tribes, wise and reputable individuals, and installed them as leaders over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officials, throughout your tribes.

¹⁶I charged your judges at that time: “Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien.

¹⁷You must not be partial in judging; hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.”

¹⁸So I charged you at that time with all the things that you should do.

This passage cuts across the retrospective itinerary to highlight, from the outset, the absolute importance of justice in the new nation that is to be set up across the Jordan. Deuteronomy will have a lot to say about law. It will be of little benefit if there are no leaders to administer it. According to the prophetic critique it was their failure in justice that caused Israel to lose the land (see Amos 5, Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 7:5-7). The leaders selected by the people to administer justice also have a military role (1:15).

Clearly those who finally put Deuteronomy together saw the administration of justice as of such an importance that they wanted to speak of it before they spoke of leaving Horeb. It is of the essence of the covenant that formed Israel into a people.

There are obvious connections with both Exodus 18:13-23 and Numbers 11:11-17, though here it is the people who are to choose their leaders.

‘YHWH your God’ (1:10 – the first of 276 occurrences in Deuteronomy) has kept his promise. He has blessed them and they are ‘as numerous as the stars of heaven’ (1:10; see Exodus 32:13, quoted on page 35). This is the blessing given at creation (Genesis 1:28).

Their leaders are to be ‘wise, discerning, and reputable’ (1:13), and impartial (1:16-17). The inclusion of the ‘resident alien’ (1:16) is important and typical of Deuteronomy. Justice is to be for everyone resident in the land. Important, too, is the assertion ‘judgment is God’s’ (1:17). This is why the leaders are to be ‘wise’ (1:15), seeking always to do God’s will and open to discern the presence and movement of God’s Spirit when they discern what judgment or decision is to be made.

The concluding statement asserts that ‘at that time’ (at Mount Horeb) Moses transmitted legislation to those whose responsibility it was to administer justice. He is now going to share it with ‘all Israel’ (1:1), but not before he has pointed out the lessons of the Wilderness Period.

The Deuteronomistic School continues to refer to the mountain of revelation as 'Horeb'(1:19; see 1:6, and the note on 1:2). Moses has reminded the people of YHWH's command to leave Horeb and 'go into the hill country of the Amorites'(1:7). After 'eleven days'(see 1:2), journeying 'through all the great and terrible wilderness', they reach 'Kadesh-barnea'(1:19, see map page 45), and are ready to move into 'the land of the Canaanites'(1:7) from the south and take possession of the 'hill country of the Amorites'(1:19, 20). 'Amorite' seems to have been a term in general use in the ancient Near East for the people to the west of Mesopotamia. Originally they may have come south with the collapse of the kingdom of the Amurru in the late Bronze Age, and they appear to have been scattered in various parts of Canaan and Transjordan.

The writers of the Deuteronomistic School have Moses remind the people of the tragic events that took place in Kadesh, events that resulted in the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and the failure of the Exodus generation, including Moses, to survive to enter the Promised Land.

It all began with a failure in trust. The people suggested that they send people in to spy out the land, and Moses agreed. Moses selected a representative from each of the twelve tribes and they spied out the Valley of Eshcol, a valley associated with Mamre (and therefore Hebron) in Genesis 14:13 and 24. Their report, which included sighting of giants (offspring of the legendary Anakim) frightened the people, who 'grumbled' and 'rebelled'.

This is obviously a story that had come down in the tradition. It is instructive to see how differently it is told by the Priestly School in Numbers 13-14.

¹⁹Then, just as YHWH our God had ordered us, we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrible wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, until we reached Kadesh-barnea. ²⁰I said to you, "You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which YHWH our God is giving us. ²¹See, YHWH your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as YHWH, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed."

²²All of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to."

²³The plan seemed good to me, and I selected twelve of you, one from each tribe. ²⁴They set out and went up into the hill country, and when they reached the Valley of Eshcol they spied it out ²⁵and gathered some of the land's produce, which they brought down to us. They brought back a report to us, and said, "It is a good land that YHWH our God is giving us."

²⁶But you were unwilling to go up. You rebelled against the command of YHWH your God; ²⁷you grumbled in your tents and said, "It is because YHWH hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us. ²⁸Where are we headed? Our kindred have made our hearts melt by reporting, 'The people are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven! We actually saw there the offspring of the Anakim!'"

YHWH is carrying them

²⁹**I said to you,
“Have no dread
or fear of them.
³⁰YHWH your God,
who goes before
you, is the one who
will fight for you,
just as he did for
you in Egypt be-
fore your very eyes,
³¹and in the wilder-
ness, where you
saw how YHWH
your God carried
you, just as one
carries a child, all
the way that you
traveled until you
reached this place.
³²But in spite of
this, you have no
trust in YHWH your
God, ³³who goes
before you on the
way to seek out a
place for you to
camp, in fire by
night, and in the
cloud by day, to
show you the route
you should take.”**

Moses reminds the people of how he repeated his plea (see 1:22) that they not to be afraid of the opposition they would meet in Canaan: ‘YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you’(1:30). This way of thinking of national gods was universal in the ancient Near East. Like their neighbours, the Israelites assumed that their enemies were the enemies of their national god, and since the Deuteronomic School believed that YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, was the only real god, they were confident that, unless YHWH abandoned them, they were certain of victory.

The imagery they use here for YHWH’s guiding presence is taken from the tradition:

YHWH went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day,
to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night,
to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by
night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire
by night left its place in front of the people.

– Exodus 13:21-22 (and Numbers 14:14)

Moses reminds them ‘how YHWH your God carried you, just as one carries a child’(1:31). ‘Carry’(nāša’) includes the idea of sustain, provide for. We recall the manna (Exodus 16) and the water from the rock (Exodus 17). We are reminded of the following from Exodus:

I bore (nāša’) you on eagles’ wings and brought you to my-
self ... my treasured possession out of all the peoples.

– Exodus 19:4-5

The image is picked up by Isaiah:

You have been borne by me from your birth, carried from
the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you
turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I
will carry and will save.

– Isaiah 46:3-4

Moses reminds God that it is he, YHWH, who is carrying the people, not Moses:

Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them,
that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a
nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised
on oath to their ancestors?

– Numbers 11:12

Note the irony here, They have been spying out the land to discover the best route to take, and all the while YHWH has been ‘seeking out a place for you to camp ... to show you the route you should take’(1:33). They should trust YHWH.

YHWH's response to the people's failure in trust and rebellion is anger and severe punishment. This is not a theme found in Genesis and only once in Exodus, when God is said to have been angry with Moses for continuing to resist his vocation (Exodus 4:14). However, it is a key theme in Deuteronomy, and we offer a reflection in the following pages (40-42).

As in the Priestly version of this story, the punishment that the rebellious people have to suffer is that none of them will enter the promised land (1:35; see Numbers 14:30). An exception is made for Caleb (1:36; see Numbers 14:30). The priests' account of this scene is considerably longer, and they describe how Caleb stood out against the other spies and tried to persuade the people to trust YHWH (see Numbers 13:13-33). In their more summary account, the Deuteronomists speak simply of his 'complete fidelity to YHWH' (1:36). Both versions also exempt Joshua from the punishment (1:35; see Numbers 14:30), though for different reasons. It is their children – the very ones Moses is now addressing – who will enter and take possession of the land (1:39; see Numbers 14:31).

Committed as they all were to YHWH being just, and sharing a common view that whatever happens in this world must be willed by God (see Introduction pages 28-30), a reason had to be found for why it was that Moses did not lead the people into the Promised Land. The priests found it in the scene where Moses struck the rock (see Numbers 20:12). The Deuteronomists found it here in this scene (though see 32:52).

In verse forty YHWH commands them to 'journey back into the wilderness'. So begin the years of wandering in the wilderness. They are to take 'the way of the Red Sea' (1:40; see Numbers 14:25). This is the well-known caravan route that crossed the northern part of the Sinai peninsula. It passed through Kadesh and went on to the east arm of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aqabah (see map page 45).

³⁴When YHWH heard your words, he was wrathful and swore: ³⁵"Not one of these – not one of this evil generation – shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors, ³⁶except Caleb son of Jephunneh. He shall see it, and to him and to his descendants I will give the land on which he set foot, because of his complete fidelity to YHWH."

³⁷Even with me YHWH was angry on your account, saying, "You also shall not enter there.

³⁸Joshua son of Nun, your assistant, shall enter there; encourage him, for he is the one who will secure Israel's possession of it.

³⁹And as for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, your children, who today do not yet know right from wrong, they shall enter there; to them I will give it, and they shall take possession of it.

⁴⁰But as for you, journey back into the wilderness, *by the way of the Red Sea.*"

The Anger of YHWH

The 'anger of YHWH' in the Older Testament

The psalms frequently refer to YHWH's anger. As many as eight different words are used to bring out different nuances. Here in Deuteronomy 1:34, the verb used is qāṣap. The most general image uses 'ap ('nostrils'), and '□nap (to 'snort with anger'). The picture is of someone who is breathing fire. Sometimes God's anger is portrayed as being directed against those who would oppose God's chosen people, but mostly, as here in 1:34, it is portrayed as being directed against the people of Israel for being unfaithful to the covenant.

It is essential to examine the religious context in which this talk of divine anger occurs. As noted in the Introduction (pages 25-27) it is within the context of an assumption that God controls what happens on earth. If a person dies, they considered that it must be as a result of God's decision. Earthquakes, storms, famine, destruction, sickness, winning or losing battles, in fact any and every event was a matter of divine decision. It is a logical step from such a view that negative experiences happen because God is punishing, angry at some human infidelity, personal, familial or tribal. Past horrors are used to warn that they will be repeated (by God) if the people do not repent.

The story told here in Deuteronomy is of the Exodus generation dying out before their children enter the Promised Land. The authors and those reading the story automatically considered this a punishment from God, who must have been 'wrathful' with their behaviour. The appropriate human response to divine anger is fear, and it is precisely this fear that the authors of Deuteronomy wish to arouse in the readers of this story. The people of the covenant should fear and not sin, for sin will not go unpunished. God's anger was recognised as problematic, and questions were asked: 'O God, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?' (Numbers 16:22), but the reality was obvious to all.

In the Hebrew Scriptures it is divine compassion and mercy that transcends everything else. YHWH is essentially one who is 'slow to anger' (Exodus 34:6). This expression belongs to Israel's 'creed' (see page 58-59). In Psalm 89 we read: 'I will punish their sins ... but I will never withdraw my love from them or fail in my faithfulness' (Psalm 89:93). The authors of the Older Testament did not doubt God's justice and fidelity to his promises. YHWH retains a special place in his heart for his chosen people and is always ready to forgive:

Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, YHWH will be a light to me. I must bear the indignation of YHWH, because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is YHWH your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets. ... The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might ... Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– Micah 7:8-10, 16, 18-19

Isaiah portrays God as reluctant to express anger: 'I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made' (Isaiah 57:16). While speaking of God's anger, Jeremiah recognises that punishment is essentially something which we bring upon ourselves: 'Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon YHWH' (Jeremiah 2:19). This insight needs to be kept in mind when we read stories of divine anger and punishment in the Older Testament.

The revelation, so clear in Jesus, that God loves and does not control the world, brings about a radical shift in our thinking about God. God is the creator and so the ultimate cause of everything that is. God, however, has chosen to give us freedom (limited but real), and to respect it. This means accepting the consequences of our use of freedom, for good and ill. Knowing this, we look for scientific explanations of natural disasters and we look for human action or inaction to explain many of the awful things that occur.

When we think of God we are not looking for the proximate cause of these negative experiences. We no longer think of God as the one who decides the victor in war, and, when cities are devastated, when large populations die of hunger, when natural disasters wreak havoc, we no longer think that God is arranging this to punish sinners. When people fail to force entry into someone else's country, we rightly think in terms of who wields the stronger force. We do not leap to the conclusion that God is punishing the losers or is angry with them.

Jesus reveals God as love. If we wish to see where God is active in the often random accidents as well as in the brutal violence that afflict our world, we look for the presence of love in the midst of human tragedy. Where we find love, there we find God. Jesus is clear in his judgment of what sin is and what its effects are. He is clear, too, in his warnings of the effects of our refusal of the grace of repentance. This shows in Jesus' just anger and passionate concern to break through the apathy and hypocrisy that surrounded him. But he insists that God's initiative, God's will, is always loving. It is not God whom we must fear. Rather, we must fear our capacity to ruin our lives and the lives of others by hardening our hearts against grace (see Luke 12:4-7). Everything that God does expresses God's love, and divine love is offered to all unconditionally.

When we read of divine anger, we are not to read it in the context of divine punishment. Rather we are to think of what we do to ourselves and to others when we reject God's grace. We are to think of God as opposing evil, as determined to bring about justice. If we are going to speak of punishment as 'divine' we are highlighting the relationship of the 'punishment' to God. We are not saying that God punishes. Rather we are acknowledging two important truths: that God is the author of the order which sin violates; and that God uses even the evil effects brought about by sin to draw us to repentance.

The language of divine anger reminds us that what we do really matters and that to receive divine pardon a change in human behaviour is required: 'If pity is shown to the wicked without their learning what saving justice is, they will continue to act wrongly in the land and they will not see the majesty of YHWH' (Isaiah 26:10).

The Anger of YHWH

To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. To speak of divine anger is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we, too, should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

Through sin, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), we leave our Father's home and find ourselves feeding the pigs. None of this is God's choice. The Father awaits us with tremendous love. The God of Jesus utterly respects human freedom even when we choose to abuse it. God, however, is not a victim of our wrong choices, nor is God a bystander. God constantly pours into our hearts the love that will bring about reconciliation, justice and peace, provided we welcome God's grace and have the courage to follow God's inspiration.

The authors of Deuteronomy did not have the privilege of seeing God as God is revealed by Jesus. They did not realise how faulty (and, in the final analysis, dangerous) their concept of God's punishing anger was. Their aim was a noble one: to warn their readers to be attentive to God's will, and not to repeat the sins of the past. As already noted, there was an assumption in the culture in which the Older Testament emerged that when bad things happened it was because God was punishing sin. They searched for reasons for the destruction of the temple and the end of the Davidic dynasty and blamed the failure of their ancestors to listen to YHWH and heed his will. They read these same lessons back into the story of their beginnings. The long period of wandering in the wilderness, and the failure of the generation of those who were liberated from Egypt in order to enjoy the Promised Land to actually reach it, is described in ways that will bring home to the people the necessity of obedience. The adult Israelites who were liberated from Egypt failed to reach the Promised Land because they refused to trust YHWH and rebelled against his will. That is the lesson to be learned.

This scene, too, is taken from the tradition and is recounted also in Numbers 14:39-45. The people see that they have sinned and think that by doing now what they refused to do before they can set things right.

Moses reminds them that YHWH instructed them not to go ‘for I am not in the midst of you’ (1:42; see Numbers 14:42, 43). They cannot conquer their enemies and enter and possess the land by their own might, but only by the power of YHWH. However, they ignore Moses, they ‘would not listen’ (1:43; šāma‘). Though this verb has already been used three times, twice in relation to the duty of the judges (1:16, 17), and once in regard to YHWH hearing the grumbling of the people (1:34), this is the first time it has been used in relation to the need for the people to ‘listen’ to God’s word. Failing to ‘listen’ the people went into battle and were defeated. We are being introduced to a key theme in Deuteronomy.

Hormah (1:44) is located in the mountainous region of Seir on the southern border of the Negeb (see map page 45).

⁴¹You answered me, “We have sinned against YHWH! We are ready to go up and fight, just as YHWH our God commanded us.” So all of you strapped on your battle gear, and thought it easy to go up into the hill country.

⁴²YHWH said to me, “Say to them, ‘Do not go up and do not fight, for I am not in the midst of you; otherwise you will be defeated by your enemies.’”

⁴³Although I told you, you would not listen. You rebelled against the command of YHWH and presumptuously went up into the hill country.

⁴⁴The Amorites who lived in that hill country then came out against you and chased you as bees do. They beat you down in Seir as far as Hormah. ⁴⁵When you returned and wept before YHWH, YHWH would neither heed your voice nor pay you any attention.

⁴⁶After you had stayed at Kadesh as many days as you did.

¹We journeyed back into the wilderness, on the way of the Red Sea, as YHWH had told me and skirted Mount Seir for many days. ²Then YHWH said to me: ³“You have been skirting this hill country long enough. Head north, ⁴and charge the people as follows: You are about to pass through the territory of your kindred, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, so, be very careful ⁵not to engage in battle with them, for I will not give you even so much as a foot’s length of their land, since I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession. ⁶You shall purchase food from them for money, so that you may eat; and you shall also buy water from them for money, so that you may drink. ⁷Surely YHWH your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years YHWH your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.” ⁸So we passed by our kin, the descendants of Esau who live in Seir, leaving behind the route of the Arabah, and leaving behind Elath and Ezion-geber.

^{8b}When we had headed out along the route of the wilderness of Moab, ⁹YHWH said to me: “Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot.”

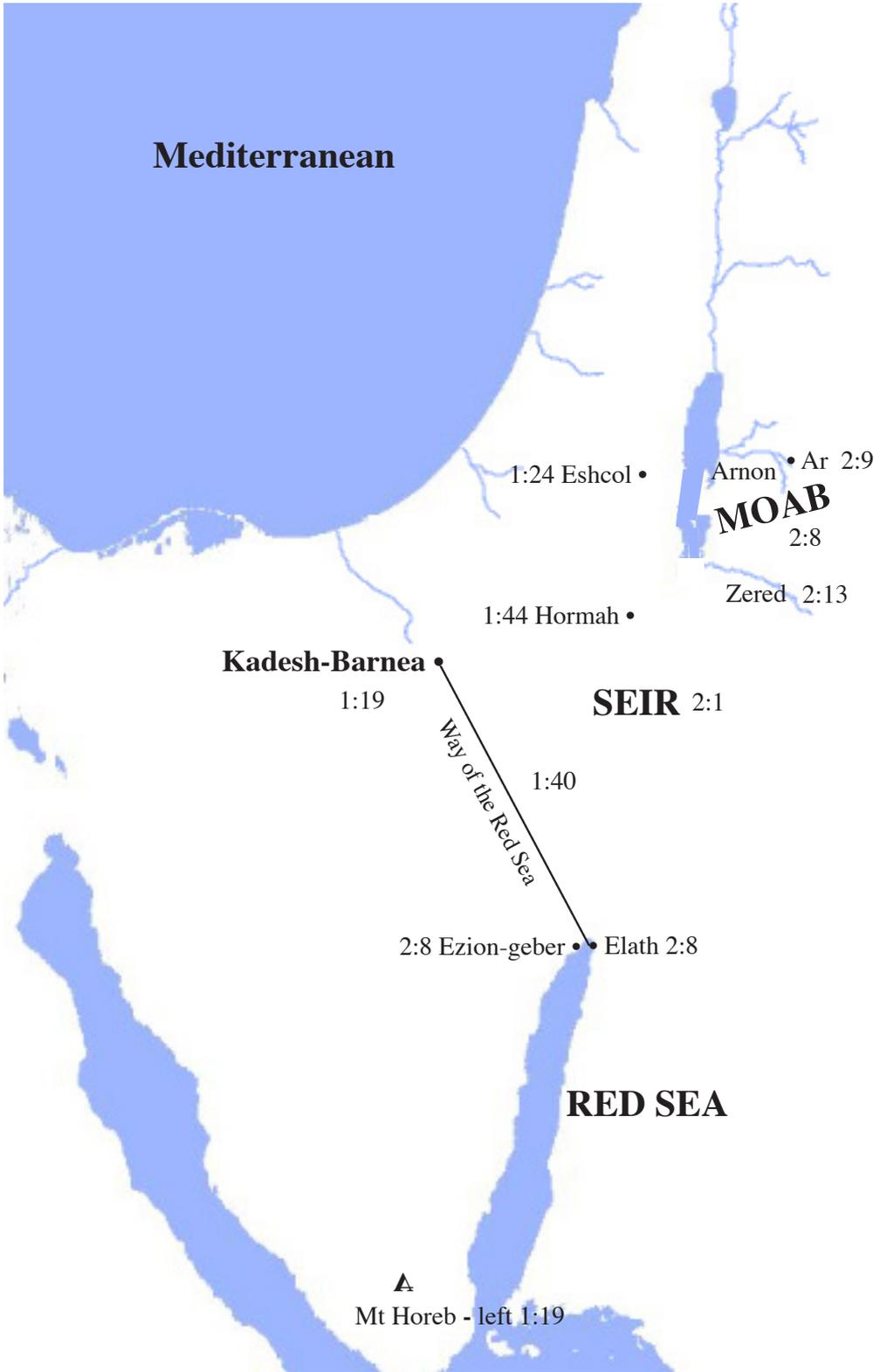
¹⁰(The Emim—a large and numerous people, as tall as the Anakim—had formerly inhabited it. ¹¹Like the Anakim, they are usually reckoned as Rephaim, though the Moabites call them Emim. ¹²Moreover, the Horim had formerly inhabited Seir, but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them, destroying them and settling in their place, as Israel has done in the land that YHWH gave them as a possession.)

In obedience to YHWH’s command (see 1:40), the people set off on the road that heads southeast from Kadesh to the Gulf of Aqabah (see also Numbers 21:4). In skirting the mountainous territory of Seir they are in fact skirting Edom.

In Numbers 20:14-21, we are told that their request to pass through Edom had been refused. Here in Deuteronomy Israel is portrayed as the stronger of the two nations. Their movement is determined, not by Edom, but by YHWH. In fact when YHWH so chooses they do pass through eastern Edom on their way north (2:4). In forbidding them to attack Edom, YHWH is saying that they do not need to, because YHWH is taking full care of them, and has done so throughout the ‘forty years’ of their wandering (2:7), but also because YHWH is lord of Edom too, and is the protector of the territory of Israel’s brother, Esau.

YHWH is lord of Moab, too (2:9), and is the protector of the territory of the son of Abraham’s nephew Lot (Genesis 19:37). ‘Ar’(2:9) is on the upper reaches of the Arnon facing the Arabian desert (Numbers 21:28).

Verses ten to twelve take us into the area of popular legend. The point is that these legendary giants were powerless to resist YHWH’s will for Lot’s descendants and Esau to take possession of Moab and Edom. What chance will the inhabitants of Canaan have? No one can prevail over YHWH. The hand of the editor is clear in the final comment of verse twelve.



¹³“Now then, proceed to cross over the Wadi Zered.” So we crossed over the Wadi Zered.

¹⁴And the length of time we had traveled from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the Wadi Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation of warriors had perished from the camp, as YHWH had sworn concerning them. ¹⁵Indeed, YHWH’S own hand was against them, to root them out from the camp, until all had perished.

¹⁶Just as soon as all the warriors had died off from among the people, ¹⁷YHWH spoke to me, saying, ¹⁸“Today you are going to cross the boundary of Moab at Ar. ¹⁹When you approach the frontier of the Ammonites, do not harass them or engage them in battle, for I will not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession, because I have given it to the descendants of Lot.”

²⁰(It also is usually reckoned as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly inhabited it, though the Ammonites call them Zamzummim, ²¹a strong and numerous people, as tall as the Anakim. But YHWH destroyed them from before the Ammonites so that they could dispossess them and settle in their place.

²²He did the same for the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, by destroying the Horim before them so that they could dispossess them and settle in their place even to this day.

²³As for the Avvim, who had lived in settlements in the vicinity of Gaza, the Capthorim, who came from Capthor, destroyed them and settled in their place.)

At YHWH’s command they cross the Zered Gorge (see Numbers 21:12). The Deuteronomist places the bulk of the long years of the wilderness journey after the people left Kadesh. The priests, on the other hand, have them wandering in the wilderness of Paran in the north Sinai. However, reading between the lines of story as recorded in Numbers, it is clear that the tradition which the priests inherited is the same as that recorded here in Deuteronomy. The priests had their own reasons for attaching the wilderness journey more closely to Sinai.

After reminding them that YHWH carried out the threat made at Kadesh against the Exodus generation (2:14-16; see 1:35), Moses tells them that on YHWH’s orders they had not moved against the inhabitants of Ammon. Verses twenty to twenty-three parallel verses twelve to fourteen. Once again we are in the area of folk legend. The original giant inhabitants of Ammon (compare Genesis 14:5), like those of Edom and Moab, were also wiped out when YHWH, the sovereign lord, gave the land to another of his vassal states, Ammon, the descendants of another of Lot’s sons (see Genesis 19:38). The point is the same. YHWH intends Israel to take possession of Canaan. It will surely happen, for nothing is impossible for YHWH.

Mention of the ‘Capthorim’(2:23) is unexpected. It was understood that the Philistines came from Capthor (Crete; see Genesis 10:14; Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4). Their presence ‘in the vicinity of Gaza’ is presented as also being part of YHWH’s grand design (see also Amos 9:7).

The Deuteronomic writers are very clear in regard to YHWH’s special love for Israel, but YHWH is the Lord of creation and history, and he has designs for all nations.

The fact that some of the Israelite tribes settled in Transjordan left the authors of the Bible with a problem, for it is not included in the boundaries as we find them in the Priestly School (see Numbers 34:10-12), and even the most extensive formulation of the Promised Land reaches to the Euphrates in the northeast, but does not include Transjordan (yet, see Deuteronomy 34:1). This is probably because the Promised Land was defined by the borders of the Egyptian province of Canaan as agreed to in the Egypt-Hittite treaty (c.1270BC).

The language of verses twenty-four and twenty-five (compare 1:21) give the impression that the Deuteronomist sees the crossing of the Arnon as the beginning of the occupation of the Promised Land. However, a distinction is still made, for we have been told that Moses 'will not enter' the Promised Land (1:37), yet he enters Transjordan.

Moses' initial offer of peace to Sihon is paralleled in Numbers 21:21-23. Here, too, Moses is aware that only by crossing the Jordan can his people enter 'the land that YHWH our God is giving us' (2:29).

Sihon rejects Moses' request to pass peacefully through his territory, and the scene is set for war. The Deuteronomist describes Sihon's decision in terms borrowed from the tradition concerning Pharaoh: 'YHWH your God hardened (qāšâ) his spirit and made his heart defiant ('āmaz)' (2:30).

In Exodus, three verbs are employed to speak of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: ḥāzaq (to be/make adamant); kābad (to be/make inflexible) and qāšâ (Exodus 7:3, to be/make determined). It is the third that is employed here in regard to Sihon. The authors are looking at events on two levels. On the human level, the human agent is responsible. However, on another level, since whatever happens is understood (in that culture) as willed by God, it must be God who is controlling and determining the decision. In the case of Pharaoh God hardens his heart to show Egypt, indeed, the whole world, God's power to redeem. It is the same here with King Sihon.

²⁴Proceed on your journey and cross the Wadi Arnon. See, I have handed over to you King Sihon the Amorite of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to take possession by engaging him in battle. ²⁵This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven; when they hear report of you, they will tremble and be in anguish because of you."

²⁶So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to King Sihon of Heshbon with the following terms of peace: ²⁷"If you let me pass through your land, I will travel only along the road; I will turn aside neither to the right nor to the left. ²⁸You shall sell me food for money, so that I may eat, and supply me water for money, so that I may drink. Only allow me to pass through on foot – ²⁹just as the descendants of Esau who live in Seir have done for me and likewise the Moabites who live in Ar – until I cross the Jordan into the land that YHWH our God is giving us."

³⁰But King Sihon of Heshbon was not willing to let us pass through, for YHWH your God had hardened his spirit and made his heart defiant in order to hand him over to you, as he has now done.

³¹YHWH said to me, "See, I have begun to give Sihon and his land over to you. Begin now to take possession of his land."

³²So when Sihon came out against us, he and all his people for battle at Jahaz,

³³YHWH our God gave him over to us; and we struck him down, along with his offspring and all his people.

³⁴At that time we captured all his towns, and in each town we utterly destroyed men, women, and children. We left not a single survivor. ³⁵Only the livestock we kept as spoil for ourselves, as well as the plunder of the towns that we had captured.

³⁶From Aroer on the edge of the Wadi Arnon (including the town that is in the wadi itself) as far as Gilead, there was no citadel too high for us. YHWH our God gave everything to us. ³⁷You did not encroach, however, on the land of the Ammonites, avoiding the whole upper region of the Wadi Jabbok as well as the towns of the hill country, just as YHWH our God had charged.

Though there could well have been Amorites north of the Arnon in the twelfth century as a result of the collapse of the Amurru Empire in northern Syria, this appears to be an imaginative retrojection into the Wilderness Period of tenth century Israelite military victories in Transjordan. There is a parallel account in Numbers 21:23-32, and Amos (mid eighth century) is familiar with the story:

I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath. Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.

— Amos 2:9-10

An heroic note is struck as the children of the Exodus generation are victorious. At the same time, the Deuteronomists leave us in no doubt that the victory was YHWH's (2:33). 'Jahaz' (21:23; also Numbers 21:23) is mentioned in the mid ninth century Moabite Mesha stele (see also Isaiah 15:4; Jeremiah 48:21, 34). See the map opposite.

Verse thirty-four introduces the notion of a *herem*: a vow not to gain any advantage from the spoils of war but to dedicate them to YHWH by 'utterly destroying men, women and children' (2:34). This dreadful notion recurs throughout Deuteronomy (see 3:6; 7:2; 13:16; 20:17; 31:5), and frequently in Joshua. The positive aspect is that it discourages wars for personal or communal gain (all spoils have to be given up to YHWH). The negative aspect is in the picture it gives of YHWH, and what the ruthless, warrior god wills or allows in order to achieve his purposes.

Since the Deuteronomist is writing when Assyria had overrun the Israelite tribal areas in Transjordan (between 734 and 721 BC), the *herem*, rather than being a military strategy commanded by YHWH, is probably a theoretical 'ideal' stressing the absolute importance of not taking any chances in compromising the purity of their religious values. This takes away some of its violence, but it hardly makes it more acceptable as an image of God.



¹When we headed up the road to Bashan, King Og of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, for battle at Edrei. ²YHWH said to me, “Do not fear him, for I have handed him over to you, along with his people and his land. Do to him as you did to King Sihon of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon.”

³So YHWH our God also handed over to us King Og of Bashan and all his people. We struck him down until not a single survivor was left. ⁴At that time we captured all his towns; there was no citadel that we did not take from them—sixty towns, the whole region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. ⁵All these were fortress towns with high walls, double gates, and bars, besides a great many villages. ⁶And we utterly destroyed them, as we had done to King Sihon of Heshbon, in each city utterly destroying men, women, and children. ⁷But all the livestock and the plunder of the towns we kept as spoil for ourselves.

⁸So at that time we took from the two kings of the Amorites the land beyond the Jordan, from the Wadi Arnon to Mount Hermon ⁹(the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir), ¹⁰all the towns of the tableland, the whole of Gilead, and all of Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei, towns of Og’s kingdom in Bashan.

¹¹(Now only King Og of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. In fact his bed, an iron bed, can still be seen in Rabbah of the Ammonites. By the common cubit it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide.)

This account, too, can be found in Numbers (see 21:33-35). Bashan is north and northeast of the Yarmuk river. It includes the Golan Heights to the east of the Lake of Galilee (see maps pages 45 and 49). It is very fertile and was considered the chief granary for Syria and Palestine as well as being renowned for the size and quality of its cattle. Edrei is on one of the eastern tributaries of the Yarmuk.

Like the previous scene, it appears to be an imaginative retrojection into the Wilderness Period of tenth century Israelite military victories. Once again the *hērem* is employed (3:6, see the comment on 2:34): ‘in each city utterly destroying men, women and children’.

Mount Hermon is linked with ‘Sirion’ also in Psalm 29:6

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

‘Senir’ means ‘snow’. Hermon, rising to 2,800 metres, is always capped in snow.

The note in verse eleven records what was probably a black basalt sarcophagus, said to have been sighted in Rabbah (today’s Amman). Its size helped perpetuate the legend of the giant Rephaim (see 2:11, 20), related to the legendary ‘Nephilim’ of Genesis 6:1-4 and the Anakim (Deuteronomy 1:28; 2:10,11).



¹²As for the land that we took possession of at that time, I gave to the Reubenites and Gadites the territory north of Aroer, that is on the edge of the Wadi Arnon, as well as half the hill country of Gilead with its towns, ¹³and I gave to the half-tribe of Manasseh the rest of Gilead and all of Bashan, Og's kingdom. (The whole region of Argob: all that portion of Bashan used to be called a land of Rephaim; ¹⁴Jair the Manassite acquired the whole region of Argob as far as the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and he named them—that is, Bashan—after himself, Havvoth-jair, as it is to this day.) ¹⁵To Machir I gave Gilead. ¹⁶And to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory from Gilead as far as the Wadi Arnon, with the middle of the wadi as a boundary, and up to the Jabbok, the wadi being boundary of the Ammonites; ¹⁷the Arabah also, with the Jordan and its banks, from Chinnereth down to the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, with the lower slopes of Pisgah on the east.

¹⁸At that time, I charged you as follows: “Although YHWH your God has given you this land to occupy, all your troops shall cross over armed as the vanguard of your Israelite kin. ¹⁹Only your wives, your children, and your livestock—I know that you have much livestock—shall stay behind in the towns that I have given to you. ²⁰When YHWH gives rest to your kindred, as to you, and they too have occupied the land that YHWH your God is giving them beyond the Jordan, then each of you may return to the property that I have given to you.”

²¹And I charged Joshua as well at that time, saying: “Your own eyes have seen everything that YHWH your God has done to these two kings; so YHWH will do to all the kingdoms into which you are about to cross. ²²Do not fear them, for it is YHWH your God who fights for you.”

There are slight discrepancies between the allocation of territory in Transjordan to Gad, Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh as described here in Deuteronomy (see the previous page) and the allocation described in Numbers 32:33-42. This is understandable when we recall that the whole area came under Assyrian control in the eighth century, with massive dislocation of the Israelite population, and that both the Priestly School and the Deuteronomic School are writing their accounts probably two centuries later. In any case, both are reading back into the Wilderness Period Israelite expansion of the tenth and ninth centuries.

The account of Moses’ directions requiring the Transjordan tribes to be part of the invasion of Canaan (3:18-20) is paralleled in Numbers 32. It is YHWH who has given the land to them (3:18), but they must do their part. The importance of tribal solidarity is underlined, along with the theme of ‘rest’ (3:20). Here, it is a promise of rest in the Promised Land once the invasion is completed.

It is interesting to reflect on how this would have been read by the exiles in Babylon, preparing to return to Judah. They were not being asked to achieve a military victory, and the ‘rest’ that they were being promised did not depend on control of land. It was a rest to be experienced as a community, living in solidarity, faithful to YHWH and to each other.

Moses is encouraging Joshua, as YHWH had instructed him to do (1:38; also 3:28). The time for handing over authority is fast approaching (see Numbers 27:15-23). Moses repeats to the new commander the words spoken to Moses by YHWH when they faced the mighty Og, king of Bashan:

Do not fear him, for I have handed him over to you, along with his people and his land.

– Deuteronomy 3:2

Similar assurances were given to the Exodus generation at Kadesh early in their journey from Mount Horeb (see 1:21, 29-31), but they failed to trust – a lesson Joshua must take to heart.

The transition from the older generation to the younger generation is complete. Even Moses must suffer the fate of his generation. He knows this, for at Kadesh, towards the beginning of the journey from Horeb, YHWH told him: 'You also shall not enter there' (1:37). In the hope that YHWH might relent, Moses pleads as a 'servant' (3:24, 'ebed) pleads with a 'Lord' (3:24, 'ādōnay). He wants to 'cross over and see' (3:25). YHWH permits him to 'see', but not 'cross over'.

It will become clear in the following chapter that the Deuteronomist is well aware of the scandal of Beth-peor (see 4:3, and the account in Numbers 25). Mentioning Beth-peor here (3:29) can hardly be accidental. The new generation, led by Joshua, are being called to faith, and, at the same time, are being reminded of how vulnerable they are to the temptation not to trust YHWH, and to 'worship idols' – whatever form these false gods might take.

It was the failure of the older generation to believe in YHWH that led to the debacle at Kadesh (1:41-45) and the long years spent in the wilderness. Now YHWH is calling the younger generation to learn from the sins of their ancestors and have the courage to believe in YHWH's promise. We might recall the words of Jeremiah spoken when Jerusalem was destroyed and the future looked immensely bleak:

Surely I know the plans I have for you, says
YHWH, plans for your welfare and not for
harm, to give you a future with hope.

– Jeremiah 29:11

This is the truth which Joshua is being called to trust, as are the exiles in Babylon who are reading these words, and the returned exiles facing difficulties in post-exilic Judah. Each new generation is called to the same trust, as are we.

²³At that time, too, I entreated YHWH, saying: ²⁴“O Lord YHWH, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours! ²⁵Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.”

²⁶But YHWH was angry with me on your account and would not heed me. YHWH said to me, “Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again! ²⁷Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. ²⁸But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see.”

²⁹So we remained in the valley opposite Beth-peor.

Chapter four has a special place in Deuteronomy. It belongs here in the opening section, for it continues to portray Moses as calling the people to look back and learn from their experiences. It is the first teaching ‘sermon’ in Deuteronomy, and it is a beautiful summary of the message of the whole book. Moses is teaching the people the lessons they will need to learn if they are to take possession of the land and remain in it. Chapter four is also looking forward, preparing the way for the following chapters which summarise the essential elements of the revelation given to Moses on Sinai - beginning with the ‘Ten Words’ (Decalogue) in chapter five. At the same time, the presence of so many distinctively Priestly terms points to this chapter as an example of the kind of hard-won consensus between the different Schools that led to the establishment of the Torah.

¹So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and edicts that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that YHWH, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ²You must neither add anything to the word that I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of YHWH your God with which I am charging you. ³You have seen for yourselves what YHWH did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how YHWH your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, ⁴while those of you who held fast to YHWH your God are all alive today.

Though the verb *šāma* (translated here ‘give heed’) has already been used seven times in different contexts, it is the first time (though see 1:34) it has been used in a call to Israel. It sets the tone for the whole Book (in which it occurs 92 times). It is also the first time we have met the verb ‘teach’ (*lāmad*), which is a key to the literary form. We are to read this teaching on two levels. On one level we are listening to Moses speaking to the people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. On another level we are listening to the Deuteronomist addressing the exiles in Babylon as they prepare to return. The Deuteronomist wants them to learn from the sins of their ancestors – sins that brought about their banishment from the land. If they want not only to enter, but to ‘occupy’ the land, they must listen attentively to ‘the word’ (4:2; see 1:1) that YHWH is about to speak to them through Moses, and they must ‘observe’ (‘*āšâ*, ‘do’) what YHWH is instructing them to do (see 1:18), in his ‘statutes’ (*ḥoq*, written instructions), and ‘edicts’ (*mišpāt*, binding judicial rulings) – beginning with the decalogue in chapter five.

The land is a gift freely offered by YHWH as he promised to ‘your ancestors’ (4:1, see 1:8, and the texts on page 32-33). However (as the Babylonian exiles to whom this is addressed well know from their current experience), remaining there depends on their ‘heeding’ and ‘observing’ the ‘commandments’ (*mišwâ*) of YHWH your God’ (4:2). Verse two is typical treaty language (see 1 Maccabees 8:30).

The setting for Moses’ words is in ‘the valley opposite Beth-Peor’ (3:29). Moses has only to remind them of what happened there when some among them fell into idolatry. The story was known to Hosea (9:10), and is recounted in Numbers 25. The key thrust of chapter four is a warning against worshipping false gods. To do so is to choose death. Moses wants them to ‘live’ (4:1).

Moses is appealing to the people to see themselves on the world stage, for they have a mission to the world to reveal the true nature of God. Through their faithful observance of what he calls here ‘the entire law’ (tôrâ, see 1:5), ‘the peoples’, the nations of the world, will come to see two things: firstly, how close YHWH is to his people ‘whenever we call to him’ (4:7); and secondly, how ‘just’ (ṣaddiq) are the statutes and edicts that Israel has been given by YHWH.

We are surely meant to recall the initial call of Abraham:

YHWH said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

– Genesis 12:1-3

‘In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’. Seeing how close YHWH is when compared to their own ‘gods’, and admiring the justice in the ‘statutes and edicts that make up the ‘law’ of Israel, other nations will be want to learn more about the God of Israel.

⁵See, just as YHWH my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and edicts for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. ⁶You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as YHWH our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and edicts as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

⁹But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children

–

¹⁰how you once stood before YHWH your God at Horeb, when YHWH said to me, “Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so”;

When, as a punishment for the rebellion at Kadesh, YHWH declared that none of the Exodus generation would live to enter the Promised land, he also said that the children, who were not responsible for the rebellion, would take possession of it (see 1:39). That was thirty-eight years ago (see 2:14). So the oldest members of the community that Moses is addressing, those in their forties and fifties, would have witnessed as children the revelation at Horeb. Moses instructs them never to forget it, and to tell their children and grandchildren what they experienced (4:9). This is characteristic of covenant treaties. In a treaty of Esarhaddon of Assyria with his vassals (672BC), we read: ‘You swear to inform your sons and grandsons to keep this treaty.’

When Moses tells them to ‘take care and watch yourselves’ (4:9), the word translated ‘yourselves’ is *nepeš*. He is speaking of their deepest selves, their deepest longings.

YHWH says he wants them to learn to ‘fear’ him (4:10; compare Jeremiah 32:39). That this is a special kind of fear is clear from the following text from Exodus:

Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.

– Exodus 20:20

They are not to be afraid of YHWH. They have just been told that the nations will be impressed at how close the relationship of the people is with their God (4:7). They are to fear, not God, but what will happen to them if they break their covenant with God. They are to fear sin. The Book of Proverbs expresses well the meaning of this ‘fear’:

The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance ... I hate.

– Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

– Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.

– Proverbs 14:27

Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6). The fear of the Lord is the opposite of ‘pride and arrogance’. It is ‘knowing the Holy One’: knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour. It results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’.

The description of the Sinai experience is traditional:

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because YHWH had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.

– Exodus 19:17-18

Though Exodus speaks of YHWH descending upon the mountain, it goes on to say that YHWH ‘spoke to you from heaven’ (Exodus 20:22). The Deuteronomist never speaks of YHWH descending upon the mountain. He also insists on the fact that ‘you heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice’ (4:12). The reasons for this insistence will become clear shortly when he underlines the command that they are to make no images of YHWH (4:16).

For the first time we hear the word ‘covenant’ (b^crît), a key word that occurs 27 times in Deuteronomy. Covenants were a normal practice in ancient Near East diplomacy. The details depended on the power relationship between the two parties, but essentially it was an arrangement between a ‘lord’ and a ‘vassal’. The vassal enjoyed a measure of autonomy and protection, and in exchange promised loyalty and support to the lord. Judah was a vassal of Assyria throughout the seventh century till Josiah broke the covenant and declared Judah independent.

Israel’s obligations under the covenant with YHWH were to observe the ‘ten commandments’ (4:13; literally, the ‘ten words’). According to the tradition, in obedience to YHWH’s command:

Moses wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

– Exodus 34:28

In the version of the Deuteronomist, the ‘ten words’ are always said to have been written by YHWH (see 4:13; 5:22; 9:10; 10:2, 4). According to the Deuteronomist, the rest of the statutes and edicts were given to Moses on Sinai (Horeb), and he was told to teach them to the people – a charge which he is preparing to carry out now as they are ‘about to cross into the land and occupy it’ (4:14). As we shall see, these statutes and edicts were written down by Moses (see 27:3, 8; 28:58; 31:9,24).

¹¹you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds.

¹²Then YHWH spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.

¹³He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets. ¹⁴And YHWH charged me at that time to teach you statutes and edicts for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy.

¹⁵Since you saw no form when YHWH spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, ¹⁶so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any *statue*—the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. ¹⁹And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that YHWH your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven.

Before presenting the ‘ten words’(5:6-21), the Deuteronomist focuses attention on the first and principle commandment which concerns our relationship with God, and on the specific point that forbids making any kind of ‘idol’(pesel, a image carved in stone, wood or metal), or ‘statue’(semel) in any ‘form’(t^emûnâ) whatsoever, whether it be in the ‘likeness’(tabnît) of a man or a woman, or an animal, or a bird, or a snake, or fish. Examples of such images abound in Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia, indeed throughout the ancient world. He repeats what he has already said (4:12): when they had that awesome experience of YHWH on the mountain, they ‘saw no form (t^emûnâ)’(4:15). Since they saw no form they are not to make any.

He goes on to warn them against worship of the stars, a practice that was also common throughout the ancient world, and against which the prophets continually spoke. It was clearly common in Israel and Judah in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. We have to make an important adjustment here, and remember that the stars were universally considered to be living beings, and, since they were thought to be the purest element (fire), and dwelt in the heavens, they were assumed to be ‘gods’. Even the Deuteronomist thinks that YHWH has arranged for them to rule over other nations (4:19; see 32:8). As late as the book of Jesus Ben Sira (c.180BC) we read:

He appointed a ruler for every nation,
but Israel is the Lord’s own portion.

– Sirach 17:17

Job speaks of the ‘stars’ as ‘divine beings’(Job 38:7, ‘elōhîm, ‘gods’). Read Psalm 82 in which YHWH is portrayed as dismissing the other gods from the divine council because of their lack of concern for justice. When monotheism triumphed these ‘gods’ were thought of as ‘divine’ beings of a lesser nature (‘angels’).

Other nations worship these heavenly beings. Israel, however, must be different.

Israel must worship only YHWH, who ‘has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt to become a people of his very own possession’ (nah^alâ, 4:20). It is interesting to read the prayer prayed by Solomon on the occasion of the consecration of the temple – a prayer composed also by the Deuteronomists (note especially the words in *italics*). This text, too, is written in the light of the Babylonian Exile:

If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; yet if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent, and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly’; if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies, who took them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name; then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you; and grant them compassion in the sight of their captors, so that they may have compassion on them (*for they are your people and heritage (nah^alâ), which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron-smelter*). Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant, and to the plea of your people Israel, listening to them whenever they call to you. For you have separated them from among all the peoples of the earth, to be your heritage (nah^alâ), just as you promised through Moses, your servant, when you brought our ancestors out of Egypt, O Lord YHWH.

– 1Kings 8:46-53

The comparison of Egypt to an ‘iron smelter’(4:20) is found also in Jeremiah 29:13.

Just as YHWH has chosen Israel as his very own, his ‘possession’, his ‘inheritance’, so he is giving to them the Promised Land as their very own. Moses will not enjoy it (4:21; see 1:37, 3:27), but they will.

²⁰But YHWH has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now. ²¹YHWH was angry with me because of you, and he vowed that I should not cross the Jordan and that I should not enter the good land that YHWH your God is giving for your possession. ²²For I am going to die in this land without crossing over the Jordan, but you are going to cross over to take possession of that good land.

²³So be careful not to forget the covenant that YHWH your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that YHWH your God has forbidden you. ²⁴For YHWH your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.

²⁵When you have had children and children's children, and become complacent in the land, if you act *destructively* by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of YHWH your God, and provoking him to anger, ²⁶I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. ²⁷YHWH will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where YHWH will lead you.

²⁸There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.

²⁹From there you will seek YHWH your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. ³⁰In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to YHWH your God and heed him. ³¹Because YHWH your God is a *compassionate* God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.

Note the care that has gone into the construction of this passage. It begins by warning the people not to forget (4:23), and ends with the assurance that YHWH does not forget (4:31). The Israelites will act 'destructively'(4:25), but YHWH 'will not destroy'(4:31). The people will be blessed and will grow in numbers as they put their roots down in the land (4:25), but will be uprooted (4:26), and 'only a few of you will be left among the nations where YHWH will lead you'(4:27).

It speaks of YHWH as a 'jealous' God (4:24, qannā', see Exodus 34:14): a God who will not tolerate rivalry, for he will not allow any other 'god' to take from him the people he loves. Like a 'devouring fire' his love must burn away all that resists it. However, when, having strayed, the people repent, they are assured that YHWH remains 'compassionate'(raḥûm, 4:31). This is an essential quality of YHWH, and part of the Israelite 'creed' (see page 61):

YHWH, YHWH, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

In the mouth of Moses, these words sound like a prophecy in which he foretells their turning from and return to YHWH. It speaks in terms of mass deportatation, a policy introduced by the Assyrian Empire in the ninth century. Transjordan and Galilee experienced it in 734 under Tiglath-pileser (see 2Kings 15:29). It occurred in Samaria in 721 under Sargon II, and in Judah in 597 and again in 587 under the Babylonian king, Nebuchadrezzar.

However they might have imagined foreign gods when they looked at them from within Israel and Judah, it was the experience of the Babylonian Exile that convinced them that the 'gods' of the proud kingdom of Babylon (and so of other kingdoms) were nothing but senseless creations 'made by human hands'(4:28).

The following texts echo Exodus 34:6.

YHWH your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.

– 2Chronicles 30:9

Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

– Joel 2:13

I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

– Jonah 4:2

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing steadfast love.
He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

– Micah 7:18-20

Although he causes grief, he will be tenderly compassionate according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

– Lamentations 3:32

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments.

– Daniel 9:4

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

– Nehemiah 9:17

You, O Lord, are a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15 (see 111:4 and 145:8)

Psalm 103 is an extended reflection on Exodus 34.

YHWH forgives all your guilt ...
and surrounds you with steadfast love and tender compassion ...
so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's ...
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
YHWH is tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will accuse, but not always; he will be angry, but not forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our guilt ...
As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we are; he remembers that we are dust ...
The steadfast love of YHWH always was and always will be for those who fear him, and his righteousness passes on from children to grandchildren, to whoever keeps his covenant and remembers to carry out his commandments.

– Psalm 103:3,4,5,7-10,13-14,17-18

(repeated from page 58)

²⁹From there you will seek YHWH your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. ³⁰In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to YHWH your God and heed him.

³¹Because YHWH your God is a *compassionate* God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.

It is their conviction that YHWH is 'compassionate', and that he will not abandon Israel, nor forget his covenant, that supports the other conviction of the Deuteronomist that Israel will turn back (t^ešübâ, 4:30) to YHWH and obey him. What is required of the people is that 'you search after him with all your heart and soul' (4:29). This conviction is shared by the Priestly School:

If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors... if their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant ... For the land shall be deserted by them, and enjoy its sabbath years by lying desolate without them, while they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they dared to spurn my ordinances, and they abhorred my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am YHWH their God; but I will remember in their favour the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 26:40-45

So, too, Jeremiah, addressing the exiles in Babylon:

When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says YHWH, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says YHWH, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

– Jeremiah 29:12-14

It is a constant theme in the Isaiah School:

Seek YHWH while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near.

– Isaiah 55:6

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name.

– Isaiah 65:1

Whatever his people might do, they can be sure that YHWH 'will not forget the covenant' (4:31). They must repent, but repentance is always open to them.

In this extraordinarily rich passage, the Deuteronomists speak again of YHWH's special love and choice of Israel, though the word 'love' ('āhab) is used here for the first time (4:37). He speaks again of the redemption from Egypt (4:34, 37; compare Jeremiah 32:21), declaring that never before has a god 'taken a nation for himself from the midst of another nation' (4:34).

At a superficial reading of history, this demonstrates that YHWH is more powerful than the gods of Egypt. This idea was not new to Israel. What is new is the extraordinary conclusion that 'there is no other god besides YHWH' (4:35). 'So acknowledge today and take to heart that YHWH is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other' (4:39). To this point the Deuteronomist has been repeating the traditional prohibition of worshipping another god. Here he declares that there are no other gods to worship. The Deuteronomists are monotheists.

We find the same idea in the writings of the Isaiah School, also from the time of the Exile:

I am YHWH, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.

– Isaiah 45:5

Other nations will come to Israel declaring:

God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him.

– Isaiah 45:14

For thus says YHWH, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it ... I am YHWH, and there is no other.

– Isaiah 45:18 (see 45:21, 22; 46:6)

This passage speaks again of the revelation on Horeb (4:33, 36), and of the essential demand that the people 'keep his statutes and commandments' (4:40).

³²For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? ³³Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? ³⁴Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as YHWH your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? ³⁵To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that YHWH is God; there is no other besides him. ³⁶From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. ³⁷And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, ³⁸driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. ³⁹So acknowledge today and take to heart that YHWH is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. ⁴⁰Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that YHWH your God is giving you for all time.

⁴¹Then Moses set apart on the east side of the Jordan three cities ⁴²to which a homicide could flee, someone who unintentionally kills another person, the two not having been at enmity before; the homicide could flee to one of these cities and live: ⁴³Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland belonging to the Reubenites, Ramoth in Gilead belonging to the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan belonging to the Manassites.

Before the development of organised cities, when a person was killed by another person, it was a matter of family honour for the closest relative of the killed person to avenge his death by tracking down and killing the person responsible. When the killing was accidental, the killer could seek asylum in a sanctuary to gain time to be able to argue his innocence. Later, systems were set in place where witnesses could be called and a court could rule.

When Josiah centralised the cult it became impossible for those responsible for accidental homicide to seek refuge in a sanctuary (see Exodus 21:12-14) because of the problem of distance. Cities of refuge had to be set up.

We may account for the presence of these verses here at the end of this introductory section by the fact that this section probably represents some of the latest material in the Book. The matter of cities of refuge is treated later (see Deuteronomy 19:1-13). There Moses is presented as instructing them to set up three cities of refuge, and adding a further three when and if the Israelite territory expands.

A problem is presented by the fact that the Priestly School has Moses commanding the people to set aside six cities of refuge, three on each side of the Jordan (Numbers 35:14). By adding these verses here (4:41-43), the Deuteronomists interpret Moses' words in chapter nineteen as mentioning three (not six) because he has already set up the other three in Transjordan. It is perhaps a good example of the fruits of the kind of discussion and debate that led to the final formation of a Torah acceptable to the various Schools.

Bezer is mentioned in the ninth century Mesha stele. It is not far from Medeba (see map page 49). Ramoth is in Gilead. However it is somewhat north of the Jabbok river – an indication that Gad had extended its territories (see map page 51). The Golan is in Geshur (see map page 51).