

**PART FIVE**  
**CALL TO RATIFY THE COVENANT**  
**THERE IS A FUTURE BEYOND FAILURE**  
**DEUTERONOMY 29:1 – 32:47**

**<sup>1</sup>These are the words of the covenant that YHWH commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb.**

**<sup>2</sup>Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that YHWH did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, <sup>3</sup>the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders.**

**<sup>4</sup>But to this day YHWH has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear. <sup>5</sup>I have led you forty years in the wilderness. The clothes on your back have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out; <sup>6</sup>you have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink—so that you may know that I am YHWH your God.**

**<sup>7</sup>When you came to this place, King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan came out against us for battle, but we defeated them. <sup>8</sup>We took their land and gave it as an inheritance to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.**

Verse one forms a bridge between 4:44 – 28:68 and 29:2 – 32:47. ‘These words’ link back to 4:44 and cover all that has followed. This includes the decalogue (5:6-21), which was revealed to the people at Mount Horeb (5:2-5). It also includes the statutes and edicts (12-25) that YHWH revealed to Moses at Mount Horeb, and instructed him to reveal to the people later (5:31).

Moses has just carried out YHWH’s instruction. The people have heard the content of the covenant, and the consequences of their acceptance or rejection of it (the ‘blessings’ and ‘curses’). Moses is now about to call on them ‘in the land of Moab’, to ratify it, for themselves and for the generations that are to follow.

Verses two to eight consist in a rapid historical survey of the wonderful things that YHWH has done for them. This begins with their redemption from slavery in Egypt (29:2-4). Listing the texts where this theme has already featured helps highlight its central importance (see 1:30; 4:34, 37; 5:6, 15; 6:12, 21-22; 7:8, 18-19; 8:14; 9:26; 11:2-4; 13:5, 10; 15:15; 20:1; 24:18, 22; 26:8). They still do not have the mind (lēb, ‘heart’) to know, the eyes to perceive and the ears to hear the amazing reality of YHWH’s love for them (29:4; compare Jeremiah 5:21; Isaiah 42:18-20; 43:8). Recall the beautiful promise in Jeremiah:

I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH;  
and they shall be my people and I will be their  
God, for they shall return to me with their whole  
heart.

– Jeremiah 24:7

YHWH brought them through the wilderness (29:5-6; compare 8:2-4; also 1:31; 2:7; 8:15-16), and gave them victory over Sihon and Og (29:7; see 1:4; 2:24, 30-31; 3:3-4; 4:46).

In regard to the land given to the tribes in Transjordan (29:8), see 3:12-17 and 4:43.

The word ‘therefore’ (29:9) offers the wonderful things YHWH has done (29:2-8) as motivation for the assembly to ratify the covenant (see also 4:34 and 40; 11:3-7, 8). ‘Covenant’ (b<sup>c</sup>rît) is mentioned three times in this brief passage (29:9, 12, 14).

This is the assembly that Moses called together in 5:1. The purpose of the assembly was that they may hear the terms of the covenant. Now Moses calls on them to accept it, and to ratify it not only for themselves (every single one of them as well as the slaves that are part of their household), ‘but also with those who are not here with us today’ (29:15) – all future generations.

They are to take an oath to ratify the covenant (29:12), that is to say they are to accept also the consequences of failure to live it (the curses of chapter 28). This will mean that they will be YHWH’s people and YHWH will be their God, ‘as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob’ (29:13; see 26:16-19).

**<sup>9</sup>Therefore diligently observe the words of this covenant, in order that you may succeed in everything that you do.**

**<sup>10</sup>You stand assembled today, all of you, before YHWH your God—the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, <sup>11</sup>your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water — <sup>12</sup>to enter into the covenant of YHWH your God, sworn by an oath, which YHWH your God is making with you today; <sup>13</sup>in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.**

**<sup>14</sup>I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before YHWH our God, <sup>15</sup>but also with those who are not here with us today.**

## Danger and consequences of infidelity

**<sup>16</sup>You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. <sup>17</sup>You have seen their detestable things, the filthy idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, that were among them.**

**<sup>18</sup>It may be that there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart is already turning away from YHWH our God to serve the gods of those nations. It may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth. <sup>19</sup>All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, “We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways” (thus bringing disaster on moist and dry alike) –**

**<sup>20</sup>YHWH will be unwilling to pardon them, for YHWH’s anger and passion will smoke against them. All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and YHWH will blot out their names from under heaven.**

**<sup>21</sup>YHWH will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law.**

They are surrounded by false gods (the same can be said of the time of the Deuteronomists).

The danger is that they will take YHWH for granted, that they will cease to be vigilant, become too complacent, too sure of themselves, deciding what is good for themselves without regard to the covenant, and find themselves turning little by little away from YHWH.

If this happens, if the poisoned root is allowed to produce its poisoned growth, the whole nation will suffer (‘moist and dry alike’). The consequences – described here in terms of YHWH’s ‘anger’ (see pages 40-42), and already listed in the ‘curses of the covenant’ (29:21; see 28:15-68) – will be disastrous.

Moses is portrayed as ‘foreseeing’ that they will, indeed, be unfaithful. The Deuteronomists are reminding their readers of the disaster that struck Israel when the Assyrian army destroyed their cities and deported the population (721BC). They are recalling the devastation of Judah caused by the army of Sennacherib in the final years of the eighth century, and then the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under Nebuchadrezzar a century later (597 and 587BC), followed by the exile. They recall the story of Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities of the Dead Sea plain (see Genesis 19). This dreadful history is ‘because they abandoned the covenant’(29:25); because ‘they turned and worshipped other gods’(29:26).

Then, unexpectedly, we find the mysterious verse twenty-nine, the meaning of which will become clear only in the following chapter. Following the dreadful account of ruin and devastation, we are reminded that YHWH is not limited even by our infidelity. Can we still hope? After his description of Israel’s infidelity, Hosea goes on to have YHWH say:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
 How can I make you like Admah?  
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
 My heart recoils within me;  
 my compassion grows warm and tender.  
 I will not execute my fierce anger;  
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
 for I am God and no mortal,  
 the Holy One in your midst,  
 and I will not come in wrath.

– Hosea 11:8-9

And in the scroll of Isaiah we read:

My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
 nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH.  
 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
 so are my ways higher than your ways  
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:8-9

Paul speaks of God’s choice as ‘irrevocable’ (Romans 11:29).

**<sup>22</sup>The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which YHWH has afflicted it —  
<sup>23</sup>all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which YHWH destroyed in his fierce anger —  
<sup>24</sup>they and indeed all the nations will wonder, “Why has YHWH done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?”**

**<sup>25</sup>They will conclude, “It is because they abandoned the covenant of YHWH, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.  
<sup>26</sup>They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; <sup>27</sup>so the anger of YHWH was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book. <sup>28</sup>YHWH uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as is now the case.”**

**<sup>29</sup>The secret things belong to YHWH our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law.**

We can always return

**<sup>1</sup>When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where YHWH your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup>and return to YHWH your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, <sup>3</sup>then YHWH your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and turn, and gather you from all the peoples among whom YHWH your God has scattered you.**

**<sup>4</sup>Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there YHWH your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. <sup>5</sup>YHWH your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.**

**<sup>6</sup>Moreover, YHWH your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.**

**<sup>7</sup>YHWH your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. <sup>8</sup>Then you shall turn and obey YHWH, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, <sup>9</sup>and YHWH your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For YHWH will turn and take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, <sup>10</sup>when you obey YHWH your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul.**

As noted in the comment on 29:29, God is always open to renew the covenant. What is essential is that we ‘return’ (šūb). This word occurs seven times in these ten verses. We must ‘return’ our mind to the covenant (30:1), and ‘return to YHWH our God’ (30:2). If we do, YHWH will ‘turn things around’ (30:3), and ‘return’ (30:3) to us and gather us back. When we ‘return’ and obey (30:8), YHWH will ‘return’ and delight in us (30:9), because we ‘return to YHWH our God with all our heart and with all our soul’ (30:10; 30:2; see 4:29; 6:5). The expression ‘YHWH your God’ occurs twelve times in these ten verses.

Verse three speaks of YHWH’s ‘compassion’ (raḥam) – a word that speaks of intense affection (only here and in 4:31 and 13:17; compare Jeremiah 12:15; 33:26).

Verse six speaks of circumcising the heart (see 10:16). On the ‘heart’, see pages 83-84. The heart is to be consecrated to YHWH so that only life, only ‘love’ (30:6; see 6:5, page 82) comes from it (see Jeremiah 31:33). YHWH will once again offer every blessing. The main blessing is his ‘delight’ (šūš) in us (30:9; see 28:63).

I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

– Jeremiah 32:41

YHWH will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

– Zephaniah 3:17

The way is clear (see Isaiah 45:19; Romans 10:8). The whole of Deuteronomy has been devoted to conveying the essence of the commandment. It is to give absolute allegiance to YHWH:

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

loving YHWH your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him.

– Deuteronomy 11:22 (10:20, 19:9)

They are to speak of it everywhere, hold it in their hearts, and observe it.

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

– Deuteronomy 11:18-19

The choice is clear: it is between good, which leads to life, and evil, which leads to death (see Jeremiah 21:8).

Two witnesses are needed to support a claim (17:6). Moses calls on ‘heaven and earth’ (30:19; see 4:26), that is, on the whole of creation, to witness that he has carried out the instructions given him by YHWH (see 5:31) to teach the people the whole of the law, ‘the entire commandment’ (6:25; 8:1; 11:8, 22; 15:5; 19:9; 26:13; 27:1).

He concludes by exhorting the assembly (the Deuteronomists are exhorting their contemporaries, and the exhortation, of course, is for us): ‘Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live’ (30:19). And life means ‘loving YHWH your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him’ (30:20).

**<sup>11</sup>Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. <sup>12</sup>It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” <sup>13</sup>Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” <sup>14</sup>No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.**

**<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of YHWH your God that I am commanding you today, by loving YHWH your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and edicts, then you shall live and become numerous, and YHWH your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving YHWH your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that YHWH swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.**

YHWH will go with them

**<sup>1</sup>When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, <sup>2</sup>he said to them: "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and YHWH has told me, 'You shall not cross over this Jordan.'**

**<sup>3</sup>YHWH your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as YHWH promised.**

**<sup>4</sup>YHWH will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them.**

**<sup>5</sup>YHWH will give them over to you and you shall deal with them in full accord with the command that I have given to you. <sup>6</sup>Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is YHWH your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."**

**<sup>7</sup>Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that YHWH has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. <sup>8</sup>It is YHWH who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."**

Moses is one hundred and twenty years old, the fullness of life allotted by God (Genesis 6:3). God does not will that he lead the people into the Promised Land (31:2; see 1:37, 3:27, 4:21-22).

He reminds them that it will be YHWH who will lead them, and that Joshua will take Moses' place (31:3; see 1:38, 3:28). They shall certainly prevail, as they have experienced in Transjordan against Sihon and Og (31:4; see 2:31 – 3:17).

Once again the terrible theme of the *herem* is broached: they must 'deal with them in full accord with the command that I gave you' (31:5): the inhabitants of Canaan are to be utterly annihilated (see 2:34; 7:2, 26; 13:15, 17; 20:16-18). They are to be fearless, not because of their own strength, but 'because it is YHWH your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you' (31:6). This theme has been present from the opening chapter:

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 ... Have no dread or fear of them. YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes,

– Deuteronomy 1:21, 29-30

In verses seven to eight Moses repeats the same words of encouragement to Joshua.

In the same way YHWH was with Abraham (Genesis 21:22), Isaac (Genesis 26:3), Jacob (28:15), Joseph (Genesis 39:2), and Moses (Exodus 3:12). We think of Jesus whose name comes from the Greek rendering of Joshua. Matthew quotes from the Isaiah scroll, 'The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they will name him Emmanuel' (Isaiah 7:14) – which means "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). The same Gospel concludes with Jesus promising: 'I am with you always to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).



It is significant that the book of the law (tôrâ) is entrusted to the Levite priests who carry the ark and who are responsible for ministering in the cult (see 10:8; 21:5), and the elders, who were responsible for the running of the community (see 5:23; 27:1; 29:10).

On the scheduled year of remission, see chapter fifteen, and on the pilgrimage festival of Booths see 16:13-15. This festival is the perfect setting for the reading of the whole law. With the harvesting complete, everyone is free to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary and to spend a week there celebrating the faith that identifies them as a community.

On 'the place that YHWH your God will choose' (31:11) see the commentary on page 172.

Two examples of this ritual are on record. One is at the time of King Josiah:

The king went up to the house of YHWH, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of YHWH.

– 2Kings 23:2

The other is in the middle of the fifth century BC at the time of Ezra the priest (see Nehemiah 8:1-8).

Here in verses fourteen and fifteen we find the only mention in Deuteronomy of the 'tent of meeting' ('ōhel mō'ēd), or even of the 'tent' ('ōhel). It is the same with the 'pillar of cloud'. Moses has already solemnly commissioned Joshua (31:7-8). Whoever introduced these verses into the text was obviously keen to highlight the sacredness of the commissioning.

**<sup>9</sup>Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH, and to all the elders of Israel.**

**<sup>10</sup>Moses commanded them: "Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, <sup>11</sup>when all Israel comes to appear before YHWH your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.**

**<sup>12</sup>Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear YHWH your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law, <sup>13</sup>and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear YHWH your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess."**

**<sup>14</sup>YHWH said to Moses, "Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him." So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting, <sup>15</sup>and YHWH appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.**

<sup>16</sup>YHWH said to Moses, “Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. <sup>17</sup>My anger will be kindled against them in that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. In that day they will say, ‘Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?’ <sup>18</sup>On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods.

<sup>19</sup>Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites.

<sup>20</sup>For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. <sup>21</sup>And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath.”

<sup>22</sup>That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites.

<sup>23</sup>Then YHWH commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, “Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them; I will be with you.”

We might wonder why the Deuteronomists have Moses once again hammering away at infidelity and its calamitous consequences. The only light is the recognition that the cause of the calamities is the fact that ‘our God is not in our midst’(31:17).

It is surely a measure of the times during which the Deuteronomists were reflecting and writing – times that included the destruction of Israel, then of Judah, and the exile. The miracle of the return was proof for them of YHWH’s fidelity, but the Judah to which they returned was only a small part of the Promised Land and their hold on it was tenuous. They clearly felt the need of dire warnings lest the cycle of infidelity and disaster continue.

Moses is instructed to write a song to teach to all the Israelites (31:19). Clearly they are to make sure that their descendants continue to sing it (31:21). It is presented here as something that will show up their infidelity for what it is.

YHWH himself commissions Joshua in much the same words that Moses used earlier (see 31:3, 8).

The fact that verse twenty-four could follow immediately after verse thirteen reinforces the impression that 31:14-23 was stitched in at a later stage in the process of reflection and editing.

Writing (31:24) has an important place in Deuteronomy. Primacy is given to the decalogue which is described as being written by YHWH himself (see 4:13; 5:22; 9:10; 10:2, 4). Then comes the book of Deuteronomy, 'the book of the law' (31:26; see 29:21; 30:10). Its contents are presented as having been revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb. It is Moses, not YHWH, who writes them in a book (27:3, 8; 28:58; 31:9; and here in this text).

Copies are to be made in the future, significantly for the king who 'shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests' (17:18). As noted earlier, it is from this text that the title of the book, 'Deuteronomy', comes (see page 19).

We have just read that Moses has been instructed to write a song (31:19, 22).

Moses confides Deuteronomy to the Levites (31:25), who are the custodians of the ark and of the Decalogue which it contains (10:8-9; 27:9-10; 31:9). Deuteronomy is to be placed beside the ark (31:26).

We are given another bleak picture of the future (31:27-29; see the commentary on the 31:16-21, on the previous page).

**<sup>24</sup>When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end, <sup>25</sup>Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH, saying, <sup>26</sup>Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of YHWH your God; let it remain there as a witness against you.**

**<sup>27</sup>For I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. If you already have been so rebellious toward YHWH while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death!**

**<sup>28</sup>Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, so that I may recite these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to witness against them. <sup>29</sup>For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I have commanded you. In time to come trouble will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of YHWH, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands."**

**<sup>30</sup>Then Moses recited the words of this song, to the very end, in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel:**

The Song of Moses

We have already been told that this song is to be ‘a witness for me [YHWH] against the Israelites’ (31:19; see 31:21). An exceptionally gifted poet of the Deuteronomic School is reflecting on the tragic history of his people, hoping its lessons will be learned, and that the memory of the justice and faithfulness of YHWH in spite of their injustices and unfaithfulness will effect a profound repentance. The form of the poem is that of the judgment speeches of the eighth century prophets.

1. Israel is at fault, not YHWH (32:1-6)

**<sup>1</sup>Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.**

It is because the heavens and the earth are addressed here, that they can be called on elsewhere to be witnesses (see 31:28)

**<sup>2</sup>May my teaching drop like the rain,  
my speech condense like the dew;  
like gentle rain on grass,  
like showers on new growth.**

The poet’s prayer is that this reflection will have the same effect on the minds and hearts of his contemporaries as the gentle rain that brings new growth. He is praying for a new Spring.

**<sup>3</sup>For I will proclaim the name of YHWH;  
ascribe greatness to our God!**

From the start the focus of the poem is on the greatness of YHWH. The people must face their failures, but the only hope of change is for them to know ‘the greatness of our God’.

**<sup>4</sup>The Rock, his work is perfect,  
and his judgment in every way.  
A faithful God, without any wrong,  
just and upright is he.**

The first image sets the tone. YHWH is a ‘rock’ (šûr). While the desert sands blow unpredictably, and the dunes shift in an always changing landscape, the rock rises above the shifting sands, stable, eternal, unchanging. If you strike it, you can be confident that water will flow forth to quench your thirst (see 8:15).

I love you, YHWH, my strength. YHWH is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge.

– Psalm 18:1-2

YHWH is ‘perfect’ (tāmîm – whole, complete, without blemish, faultless) in all that he does, and in every aspect of the way he judges the world. YHWH is ‘faithful’ (’emûnâ – real, dependable, reliable, trustworthy). YHWH is ‘without any wrong’ (’āwel). YHWH is ‘just’ (šaddîq – God will always act according to who he is). YHWH is ‘upright’ (yāšār – straight, right, direct).

If, on the ground, things are going badly, we will need to look elsewhere for the reason.

**<sup>5</sup>yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him,  
a perverse and crooked generation.  
<sup>6</sup>Do you thus repay YHWH,  
O foolish and senseless people?  
Is not he your father, who created you,  
who made you and brought you into existence?**

This is where the problem lies. The people are YHWH's 'children'. He is their 'father'. They should take after their father. It is he who 'created' them (qānâ is used of God bringing into being, Genesis 14:19; of God redeeming, Exodus 15:16; of Eve when she gets her child from God, Genesis 4:1). It is YHWH who 'made' them ('āśâ – they are 'the work of his hands', Psalm 138:8). It is YHWH who 'brought them into existence' (kûn). Yet they are 'degenerate', they 'deal falsely' (they twist everything), they are 'perverse', 'crooked', 'foolish' (nābāl) and 'senseless' (they lack wisdom).

## 2. Evidence of YHWH's providential care (32:7-14)

**<sup>7</sup>Remember the days of old,  
consider the years long past;  
ask your father, and he will inform you;  
your elders, and they will tell you.**

The poet and those he is addressing are looking back to the distant past. The stories have come down, and are still being passed on, through oral tradition.

**<sup>8</sup>When the Most High apportioned the nations,  
when he divided humankind,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the gods;  
<sup>9</sup>YHWH's own portion was his people,  
Jacob his allotted share.**

YHWH is identified as the High God ('elyôn) of the Semitic pantheon. He shares out the other nations to other gods, but claims Israel for himself. We are reminded of earlier statements in Deuteronomy:

You are a people holy to YHWH your God; YHWH your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

– Deuteronomy 7:6

YHWH set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

– Deuteronomy 10:15

**<sup>10</sup>He sustained him in a desert land,  
in a howling wilderness waste;  
he shielded him, cared for him,  
guarded him as the apple of his eye.**

For the 'wilderness' the poet uses the word bōhû, used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the primeval chaos (see also Jeremiah 4:23)

Israel abandons the God who cares for them

**<sup>11</sup>As an eagle stirs up its nest,  
and hovers over its young;  
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,  
and bears them aloft on its pinions,  
<sup>12</sup>YHWH alone guided him;  
no foreign god was with him.**

The image of YHWH as an eagle is found also in Exodus 19:4

I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

All the care they were given came from YHWH alone. We are being prepared for the question: 'Why did you abandon me and go after other gods?'

**<sup>13</sup>He set him atop the heights of the land,  
and fed him with produce of the field;**

There are echoes here of the promise in the Isaiah scroll:

You shall take delight in YHWH, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob.

– Isaiah 58:14

**he nursed him with honey from the crags,  
with oil from flinty rock;  
<sup>14</sup>curds from the herd, and milk from the flock,  
with fat of lambs and rams;  
Bashan bulls and goats,  
together with the choicest wheat—  
you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes.**

3. Israel abandoned YHWH for other gods (32:15-18)

**<sup>15</sup>Jacob ate his fill;  
Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked.  
You grew fat, bloated, and gorged!  
He abandoned God who made him,  
and treated as a fool the Rock of his salvation.**

'Jeshurun' will appear again (33:5, 26) as an affectionate term for Israel. We find it also in Isaiah:

Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

– Isaiah 44:2

It comes from *yāšār* and means 'upright one'. It is used here ironically. They should have been upright, like YHWH their father (32:4). Instead they enjoyed his gifts, forgot that he was the source of them and reckoned they could get on quite well without him. They treated YHWH, the 'Rock (32:4) of their salvation' as a fool. It is they who are 'foolish' (*nābāl*, 32:6). 'Salvation' (*yešû'â*) occurs only here in Deuteronomy, but from the same root *yš'* YHWH was described as the one who gives Israel 'victory' (20:4), and later Israel will be described as 'a people saved by YHWH' (33:29).

**<sup>15</sup>They made him jealous with strange gods,  
with abhorrent things they provoked him.**

When YHWH is said to be ‘jealous’, we are being assured that YHWH passionately cares about what happens to his people. He does not want to see them lost in the wilderness of false gods.

**<sup>17</sup>They sacrificed to demons, not God,  
to deities they had never known,  
to new ones recently arrived,  
whom your ancestors had not feared.**

**<sup>18</sup>You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;  
you forgot the God who gave you birth.**

YHWH has been likened to a father (32:6, 15). Now he is likened to a mother, bearing Israel in her womb and going through the labour pains of giving birth. Jeremiah 2:27 hints indirectly at the same notion when he has YHWH complain:

You say to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave me birth.”

Job 38:29 uses the same imagery of God the creator:

From whose womb did the ice come forth,  
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?

In the New Testament, Paul writes:

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

– Galatians 4:19

He compares himself first to a mother and then to a father in his First Letter to the community in Thessalonika:

We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children.

– 1Thessalonians 2:7-12

In a culture that worked from the false assumption that life was handed on from the male and that the female simply received and nurtured this life, it is understandable that God, the source of all life, is spoken of in exclusively male terms. We who know differently, should not be similarly restricted. Female imagery is as appropriate as male imagery in referring to God. In both we are using metaphors and speaking by analogy. It is good to have some verses like the above that encourage us to broaden the base of our imagery when we refer to God.

4. The consequences of their abandoning YHWH (32:19-25)

The poet is reflecting on the sorry history of Israel. It is already clear that this is the result of the choices that the nation has made. Here it is presented as divine punishment issuing from God's anger. See the reflection in the Introduction on the assumption that whatever happens in this world must be willed by God. This follows if we picture God as controlling the world (pages 28-30). See also the reflection on God's anger (pages 40-42). In the drama of the poem, the indictment has been made (32:15-18). This is the ensuing sentence.

**<sup>19</sup>YHWH saw it, and was jealous  
he spurned his sons and daughters.  
<sup>20</sup>He said: I will hide my face from them,  
I will see what their end will be;  
for they are a perverse generation,  
children in whom there is no faithfulness.**

They have stopped looking towards YHWH. Here YHWH is pictured as hiding his face from them.

**<sup>21</sup>They made me jealous with what is no god,  
provoked me with their idols.  
So I will make them jealous with what is no people,  
provoke them with a foolish nation.**

On divine 'jealousy', see 32:16. The 'gods' they have been chasing after are not gods at all. They will find themselves at the mercy of a barbarous and senseless people who do not deserve the name.

**<sup>22</sup>For a fire is kindled by my anger,  
and burns to the depths of Sheol;  
it devours the earth and its increase,  
and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.**

The following pick up on some of the 'curses' of 28:22, 27-28.

**<sup>23</sup>I will heap disasters upon them,  
spend my arrows against them:  
<sup>24</sup>wasting hunger,  
burning consumption,  
bitter pestilence.  
The teeth of beasts I will send against them,  
with venom of things crawling in the dust.  
<sup>25</sup>In the street the sword shall bereave,  
and in the chambers terror,  
for young man and woman alike,  
nursing child and old gray head.**

The consequences could have been worse. They could have been annihilated as a people, as is explained in the following verse. YHWH goes on to explain why this didn't happen and speaks now of Israel's enemies.



5. Israel's enemies must not misunderstand (32:26-30)

- <sup>26</sup>**I thought to scatter them  
and blot out the memory of them from humankind;**  
<sup>27</sup>**but I feared provocation by the enemy,  
for their adversaries might misunderstand  
and say, "Our hand is triumphant;  
it was not YHWH who did all this."**  
<sup>28</sup>**They are a nation void of sense;  
there is no understanding in them.**  
<sup>29</sup>**If they were wise, they would understand this;  
they would discern what the end would be.**  
<sup>30</sup>**How could one have routed a thousand,  
and two put a myriad to flight,  
unless their Rock had sold them,  
YHWH had given them up?**

The only reason Israel has not been completely annihilated is that Israel's enemies might think that their victory was due to their own strength and not to the fact that YHWH has allowed it to happen by leaving Israel to its own resources.

6. Israel's enemies will suffer the consequences of their deeds (32:31-35)

The poet reflects further on the folly and corruption of Israel's enemies

- <sup>31</sup>**Indeed their rock is not like our Rock;  
our enemies are fools.**  
<sup>32</sup>**Their vine comes from the vinestock of Sodom,  
from the vineyards of Gomorrah;  
their grapes are grapes of poison,  
their clusters are bitter;**  
<sup>33</sup>**their wine is the poison of serpents,  
the cruel venom of asps.**

YHWH continues:

- <sup>34</sup>**Is not this laid up in store with me,  
sealed up in my treasuries?**  
<sup>35</sup>**Vindication is mine, and recompense,  
for the time when their foot shall slip;  
because the day of their calamity is at hand,  
their doom comes swiftly.**

Paul quotes the words 'vindication is mine' in Romans 12:19. If we are treated badly we are not to retaliate or seek revenge. Paul goes on to quote Proverbs 25:21-22. 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads'. The hope that a love-response will make one's enemies ashamed of their behaviour, and so lead them to repentance. Evil is to be opposed and overcome. This is possible, however, only by doing good.

All will be well

7. YHWH's enduring commitment to Israel (32:36-39)

**<sup>36</sup>Indeed YHWH will vindicate his people,  
comfort his servants,**

'Comfort' translates the Hebrew *nāham*. This is the same word that begins the magnificent poem from the Isaiah School of the exile:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from YHWH's hand double for all her sins.

– Isaiah 40:1-2

**when he sees that their power is gone,  
neither bond nor free remaining.  
<sup>37</sup>Then he will say: Where are their gods,  
the rock in which they took refuge,  
<sup>38</sup>who ate the fat of their sacrifices,  
and drank the wine of their libations?  
Let them rise up and help you,  
let them be your protection!  
<sup>39</sup>See now that I, even I, am he;  
there is no god beside me.  
I kill and I make alive;  
I wound and I heal;  
and no one can deliver from my hand.**

When Israel is brought low, they will come to see the folly of their ways. They sought refuge and shelter in 'gods' that are 'no gods' (32:21). Verse thirty-nine hints at the monotheism espoused by the Deuteronomists (see the commentary on 4:35, 39, page 63).

8. YHWH's enemies will fall (32:40-42)

YHWH, the warrior God, will see that Israel's enemies will fail.

**<sup>40</sup>For I lift up my hand to heaven,  
and swear: As I live forever,  
<sup>41</sup>when I whet my flashing sword,  
and my hand takes hold on judgment;  
I will take vengeance on my adversaries,  
and will repay those who hate me.  
<sup>42</sup>I will make my arrows drunk with blood,  
and my sword shall devour flesh—  
with the blood of the slain and the captives,  
from the long-haired enemy.**

## 9. Concluding Doxology (32:43)

**<sup>43</sup>Praise, O heavens, his people,  
 worship him, all you gods!  
 For he will avenge the blood of his children,  
 and take vengeance on his adversaries;  
 he will repay those who hate him,  
 and cleanse the land for his people.**

Israel's enemies – the Deuteronomists are thinking primarily of Assyria and Babylon – will not be triumphant over Israel for ever. More importantly, YHWH will 'cleanse the land for his people'. Cleanse the land by emptying out their enemies with their false gods. Cleanse the land by bringing Israel to its senses, so that they will truly be 'a people holy to YHWH your God who has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession' (Deuteronomy 7:6).

The ending of this song calls to mind two passages from Saint Paul. The first speaks of the faithful love of YHWH:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?  
 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us,  
 will he not with him also give us everything else?  
 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.  
 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised,  
 who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.  
 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress,  
 or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...  
 I am convinced that nothing will be able to separate us  
 from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:31-35, 38-39

Having spoken specifically of YHWH's faithfulness to Israel and the fact that 'the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29), Paul concludes:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

– Romans 11:33-36

They must choose life (32:44-47)

**<sup>44</sup>Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun. <sup>45</sup>When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel, <sup>46</sup>he said to them: "Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. <sup>47</sup>This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess."**