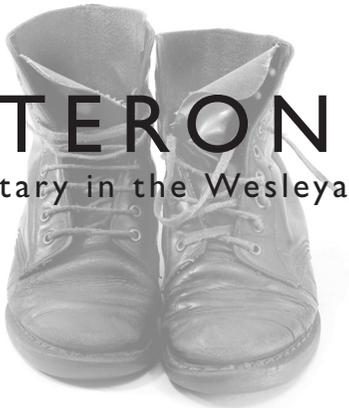


\*New Beacon Bible Commentary



# DEUTERONOMY

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

Stephen G. Green



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# COMMENTARY

## I. REMEMBER THE PAST, DO NOT FORGET: 1:1—4:40

### OVERVIEW

Forty years had transpired since Moses led a ragtag band of slaves out of the most powerful empire of the known world. The Egyptian empire was unable to control this group of slaves; the hand of God delivered them. This profound liberation would give voice to shouts and songs that Yahweh had triumphed gloriously by throwing the horse and the rider into the sea! But why would it take forty years to come to this place near the Jordan? The hard march of eleven days is all that is necessary to travel these 160 miles or so.

Fear and unbelief are the reasons that are given in Num 13:1—14:45 for the detour that would last forty years. The spies who were sent in to explore the land brought back a distressing description concerning the dangers that lie ahead: “The people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large” (Num 13:28). Fear of the threat that is in front of them, and a lack of trust in the one who liberated them, would bring about a pilgrimage to nowhere. The generation that had received the Torah at Horeb would perish. Now a new generation stood before the land of promise. This new generation is a band of nomads. They survive by the gifts that each day brings. These nomads come to trust these daily gifts for nourishment and guidance.

Nomadic wanderers were about to become a settled nation. The sacred promise is within eyesight of being fulfilled. The question that hovers behind these texts is: How will a people on the move, who had depended daily on gifts to survive, live in the settled land? There will be temptations in this land of milk and honey. The great temptation will be to forget that Israel is always to be a people who live from gift. Liberation, guidance, provision, land, and Torah are all gifts to be held in memory with gratitude.

The first four chapters form an introductory narrative that prepares the reader for the gift of the Decalogue, which functions as a structure for the Law section of chs 12—26. These opening chapters of Deuteronomy look as if they are an editorial reconstruction of material that already exists elsewhere. The accounts in these chapters have parallels in the book of Numbers. There are also a few insinuations to material in the book of Joshua. The implication of this observation is that the theologians of Deuteronomy and its tradition refashion this narrative material for their own theological purposes. The intention of this opening section is to create a narrative that distinguishes and exemplifies the community's intended identity, beliefs, values, and practices. In other words, this material is used politically to set up the politics that are promoted in the Law section: the politics of Yahweh.

## A. Introduction (1:1-5)

1:1-5

### BEHIND THE TEXT

There are four observations that need to be made as one prepares to understand this pericope: structure, places, time, and wordplay. The structure is a concentric structure. Christensen and Biddle outline the pericope as follows (Christensen 2001, 60; Biddle 2003, 15):

- A (wordplay) These words Moses spoke
  - B (place) In the area near the Jordan
    - C (time) It is eleven days from Horeb
      - D (wordplay) Moses spoke what Yahweh commanded
        - C1 (time) In the fortieth year after Horeb
          - B1 (place) In the area near the Jordan
            - A1 (wordplay) Moses expounded this Torah Yahweh spoke

The places specified in this introduction are difficult to harmonize. Most scholars understand this location in the vicinity of the Jordan in Moab. Some of these places may appear as locations where one would stop on the Exodus journey (Christensen 2001, 7). Perhaps the references mean to suggest that Deuteronomy records a series of Moses' speeches delivered along the journey (Biddle 2003, 14). The precise meaning of these locations remains obscure.

Two key places are important to make a note of in this pericope. The first is Arabah (v 1). This is the depression from the southern tip of the Dead Sea to the northern shore of the Gulf of Aqabah (Biddle 2003, 16). Most translations translate this term “wilderness.” The other very important place is Horeb (v 2). Horeb is commonly referred to as Sinai but is Deuteronomy’s name for the location where Moses received the Law from Yahweh (see the exception to this in 33:2 where the text refers to Sinai).

There are two time references in this pericope. These references root this book in very specific ways to history. The reference, “the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month,” tie the book with the proceeding books and the story of the journey through the wilderness. The journey from Horeb (Sinai) to Kadesh Barnea is described as an eleven-day (v 2) walk by way of Seir (v 2). Could it be that these two time references are to point out that forty years is not needed to travel this 160 miles or so?

The wordplay is from the Hebrew *dābar*. This Hebrew root is used twice in v 1 in the translation “these . . . words” and “Moses spoke.” It is also used once in v 3 in the translation “Moses proclaimed.” The final use is in the early part of v 6, “The LORD our God said.” Verse 6 is either the end of the first pericope or the connection to what would follow.

## IN THE TEXT

■ **1-5** The context of these opening verses is the preparation of nomadic people to become a settled people. The words spoken by Moses to the people (v 1) are none other than the words Yahweh commanded him to speak (v 3). The wordplay on *dābar* is interesting. Verses 1, 3, 5, and 6 use this Hebrew word group to convey a literary and theological message: **These are the words Moses spoke . . . Moses proclaimed . . . Moses began to expound this law, saying: The LORD our God said . . .** Additional words that speak about communicating are added to this passage to highlight the movement of revelation in and through Torah and preaching. The first of these (v 3) is **The LORD had commanded . . .** The reader should notice that Moses **proclaimed** what Yahweh **commanded**. This is understood as equivalent to Yahweh putting words into Moses’ mouth. The second of these concepts that describe communication (v 5) is: **Moses began to expound this law . . .** To **expound** means to make plain or clear.

The generation that Moses addresses is not the original assembly at Horeb, but they are still the covenant people of Yahweh who live from gift as gift. Deuteronomy is Moses’ attempt to make clear the **law** or Torah (v 5) so that it can be understood by a new generation as Yahweh’s gracious gift and themselves as the gifted ones. This Torah, in Deuteronomy, does not claim to be an additional collection of laws to supplement those given at Horeb. It is also not merely a restatement of those laws. Torah, as understood by Deu-

1:1-5

teronomy, is addressing a later generation about to encounter a new situation. It can never be woodenly spoken to a new generation. The power of Torah is always made explicit in the terms of particular circumstances of space and time (Brueggemann 2001, 26). Preaching and practice are the ways of making the old new in every generation. The expounding of the Torah by Moses is the character and purpose of the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses' preaching of Torah is a call for Israel to organize itself congruent with the past, yet relevant for the new situation they are about to enter. They are to live as the gifted ones in the settled land of promise. The subject matter of Moses' exposition of Torah is a political schema for Israel. The question that Deuteronomy's narratives and Torah answer is: How are settled farmers to live in the vein of nomads?

## FROM THE TEXT

By specifically locating this introduction in time and space, the book acknowledges that the transmission of Torah is not some wooden proposition about human conduct, but it grows out of the life and experience of a people "on the way" with God. Torah is expounded in the context of human history. This does not mean that the purpose and will of God are without authority, or that they can take any direction that one may want to take them. The gift of Torah is to be carefully received and understood, so that it can be made clear to a new generation with new challenges and temptations. This introductory pericope points to the continual need to proclaim and make clear the purpose of God in the contemporary context that is called "today."

What this says about the nature of God is that God reveals himself in the concrete context of space and time. God discloses himself in history. The self-disclosure of God is a promise to an old man, a voice in a bush, a path through the sea, a guide through the wilderness, ten words on a mountain, and a man on a cross. This self-disclosure is to be cherished, understood, and expounded to each new generation. One might say that the work of theology or preaching is never finished. God continues to disclose himself through the expounding task of preaching and teaching from the deposit of faith.

Israel would face many new temptations in the context of the settled land. These temptations may be summarized as: How do we live from gift as gift? One of the great temptations for Israel would take the form of the fertility religions: a worldview where the desire for regularity and security would become ritualized. Israel was no longer on the move as a nomadic people; she now has crops to plant and harvest and flocks that are in need of guaranteed pasture. She will live among a people whose practices are an attempt to guarantee the cycle of rain and fertility. She will be tempted, as the later Deuteronomistic Historians would note, to *waver between two opinions*. The story

of Elijah in 1 Kgs 18 narrates a confrontation with the prophets of Baal. The temptation of Baalism originates in the desire to secure one's own safekeeping by using the gods to shape the future. Any attempt to control nature or destiny is tied to an economic outcome.

When people forget that they live from gift, they begin to live for themselves. They fail to live as a gift for others. The second great theme of this exposition called Deuteronomy will explore the care of others. The relational network that is called covenant involves the interconnections of God and everything God has created. Torah is God's gift to his people. As they expound and practice Torah they are being formed into a people that live from gift as gift. Or to put the matter into a new context, How is Israel going to live in the settled land with the politics/practices of a nomadic people who are being led by Yahweh?

## B. Resume the Journey (1:6-8)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The structure of this unit appears to be linear and in two parts. Yahweh is the speaker in the first part of the passage. The speaker changes by the early part of v 8. Moses, now the speaker, refers to Yahweh in the third person in this verse. There are some manuscripts that allow the continuance of the divine speech to take place: "I swore" rather than *Yahweh swore*. The LXX uses the first-person singular in its translation. This allows for the continuity of the divine speech. The exposition of this commentary follows the Masoretic Text. By following this reading it sets up the transmission of a prior generation's word from God to a new generation's context. Christensen has a useful discussion of the structure (Christensen 2001, 11-12).

### IN THE TEXT

■ **6-8** Moses' first exposition of the Torah is not filled with laws and practices, but with story, promise, and command. Remembrance, obedience, and hope are the dynamics of Israel's journey with God. Yahweh liberated a former generation from Egyptian captivity and saved them from the horse and its rider as they passed through the sea. He sustained them with food and water and gave the precious gift of Torah on Horeb. Yahweh once again restated his promise of the land to that generation. All they have to do is trust and obey: **Go in and take possession** (v 8).

The reader of Deuteronomy recognizes that it is now the children and grandchildren of this earlier generation that stand before the land of promise. This new generation was aware of the terrifying venture that their parents and grandparents were unwilling to undertake. Therefore, their parents wandered

about in the wilderness for the next forty years. Children were born to these nomadic people. In time these children developed the proficiency needed to live the life of a nomad: a people who are dependent upon the resources of each day to sustain life. They discovered how to follow the signs of providence, to gather what is needed for each day and trust in provisions for tomorrow. Their nomadic training developed the virtue of hope fashioned by the story of Yahweh.

This new generation of nomadic pilgrims realizes that remembering their ancestors' encounter with Yahweh at Horeb is not about uncovering historical information, but an open opportunity for the present (Cairns 1992, 32). Every generation in Israel stands with its ancestors, hearing the command and promise as if for the first time (v 8). The use of **us** in this passage (v 6) includes this newest generation. There is also a grammatical change in v 8 from the first person **I have given you this land** to third person in reference to Yahweh **take possession of the land the LORD swore he would give to your fathers**. The promise of the land is not simply to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or even to a previous generation, but it stretches out before the present generation. They could see the very location where the promise will be fulfilled. All that is needed is obedience to Yahweh's imperatives: **Go in and take possession**.

## FROM THE TEXT

1:6-8

Stories of grace and promises of hope saturate the commands of God. Imperatives in the Christian faith are not given in a noncontextual world but are always in the framework of memory and anticipation. What God has done and what God has promised to do, meet the people of God in the present moment of their own history. God's Word summons faith and hope. The present is the milieu of grace. This is the manner in which the text describes the condition of Israel on the way to the land of promise.

What does this observation say about the character of God? In simple terms: the commands of God are given in the context of grace. The church is a pilgrim people. She, like Israel, is called within the milieu of election and promise. God chooses her and promises her that he will be her God and she will be his people. God commands his people within the context of all that God has done and will do. The command is an act of grace that enables the people of God to move from promise to fulfillment.

Deuteronomy 1:6-8 makes it clear that promise and fulfillment are not a type of determinism. Israel has a choice to make in the context of God's grace-filled command. Her response sets the course for her near future. Israel's negative response would bring disorientation, drudgery, and death. But the text also reminds the reader that one generation's choice does not derail the gracious activity of God. Israel will have another opportunity to stand before the land of promise. She will be instructed through the difficult times of disorien-

tation, drudgery, and even death. The promise of God will lie before her once again. A Word will be spoken, filled with memory, promise, and command.

This cycle of graced-freedom is repeated again and again in the life of Israel and the church. Relentless grace is the narrative of the canonical story of God. The cycle of failure, repentance, and deliverance can be discerned in the book of Judges and bears witness to the relentless grace of God. The rise and fall of the monarchy again displays the enduring grace of God. The failure of the people of God to hear this Word embodied in Jesus, did not short-circuit this tenacious grace of God. The grace of God calls for a response but is greater than all of the fearful and faithless responses to it. Deuteronomy invites God's people to once again stand in the moment known as today. Grace will once again fill the command of God to his people who are on the way from yesterday to tomorrow, from promise to fulfillment. **I have given . . . go in . . . take possession.**

## C. Just Leaders (1:9-18)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Deuteronomy 1:9-18 engages the concept of justice. This passage is framed (vv 9 and 16) by the phrase “at that time.” This expression teases the reader into noticing the temporal circumstances of Israel’s narrative history. “At that time” references an event recorded in Exod 18:13-23, and because it takes place prior to the giving of Torah at Horeb, it indicates that the concept of justice is an early concern of the community while it is still journeying through the wilderness.

To understand the concept of “justice” one must understand a particular world picture. Change this picture and the meaning of justice changes. In other words, the meaning of justice is tied to a belief and value system of a particular people in time. Israel’s understanding of covenant is implicit in her belief and value system. There is no doubt that her understanding of covenant grows and changes across time, but covenant is at the heart of her beliefs and values. In the ancient Near East covenants are treaties between parties. In some way a covenant is a political reality. The policies and practices contained in a covenant are connected to a larger web of social practices and beliefs. Covenant agreement involves the specific obligations that belong to various relationships within a community. Two key concepts that are associated with covenant are “righteousness” and “justice.” Deuteronomy 1:9-18 uses these concepts in varied ways to communicate the significance of a righteous and just community.

### IN THE TEXT

■ **9** In the early stages of Israel’s journey, the people came to Moses to have him settle disputes among them. But Moses was unable to execute his role as

leader-judge among the people because of the sheer number of people and his own exhaustion. According to Exod 18:13-23, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, recommended that Moses create a social structure of judges. These judges were to help Moses in the task of creating a just community by hearing the disputes within the community and judging rightly between the people. The criterion for "judging rightly" is the world picture of covenant with its policies, practices, and values. This world picture comes from the character of Yahweh, which is revealed in the narrative of his dealings with Israel.

■ **10-11** Israel's experience of deliverance from bondage and fruitfulness in the land are both implicit reminders that she lives from the gifts of Yahweh. But these gifts become not only an opportunity to flourish and increase but also a threat to exploit others in the community. The dilemma that fruitfulness brings is the overreaching of people against one another. Moses anticipates that Israel will continue to be fruitful and that Yahweh's generative promise will remain well beyond the nomadic wilderness wanderings. Into the ever-expanding community a system of adjudicating between parties must be set up and maintained. Israel's very existence is dependent upon it.

■ **12-15** Moses administered justice in the community's life as a result of his encounters with Yahweh. But, the question is presupposed, what will happen to justice in the absence of Moses? Verses 12-18 establish a community structure that enables the settling of relational disputes by setting up a social arrangement with leaders that allows for the maintenance of a just community.

Verses 13-15 set forth the structure and the criteria of leaders. The structure is concerned with the matter of governance: polity. The content of this polity is the heart of the book of Deuteronomy. This section of the passage is concerned with the positions of leadership for this governance. The functions of the leaders described in these verses are not easy to distinguish. There may be a military function or an administrative role or a judicial function. Possibly the roles will overlap in the early stages of Israel's possession of the land. What is important is that the assignment of these roles is to preserve justice and equity among the people of Yahweh.

The structure itself is not capable of securing justice and equity; it takes people to enable the politics of Yahweh to function. They need to be people of wisdom, understanding, and who garner the respect of the others (v 13). These virtues indicate those who have a reputation in making judgments acceptable to the community and the ability to know, discern, or distinguish between good and bad. In order for Israel to function as a people of justice, it will take both a particular politic and public persons who have the qualities to judge rightly.

■ **16-18** The concern in these verses is with the ultimate goal of this polity in Israel. Justice and impartiality must be the warp and woof of the people

called Israel. Deuteronomy, as a whole, will in due course define the concept of justice, but the reader is given the core values of how justice is confirmed. Verse 16 refers to the necessity to **judge fairly**. This phrase is made up of two key Hebrew root words that define Israel's covenantal life. The first of these is *šāpaṭ*, which means "to judge." The word "justice" (*mišpaṭ*) comes from this root word. Various forms of *šāpaṭ* are found twice in v 16 and twice in v 17. In these verses this word is translated **judges** twice, **judging**, and **judgment**. Justice (*mišpaṭ*) is the righting of wrongs. The second word (*šedeq*, translated **fairly**) comes from the root form *šdq*, which conveys the idea of rightness; the noun *šedāqā* means "righteousness." Those who practice and promote *šedāqā* in the community are the righteous (*šadiq*). "Righteous" does not have some spiritual or disembodied meaning, but it is always understood within the context of covenant. When the requirements for being faithful in a relationship are performed by fulfilling covenant obligations, then that person or community is *righteous*. The opposite is also true. A person acts in an unrighteous way when he or she does wrongly or fails to do rightly in the specific obligations of the relationship. When judges **judge fairly**, then justice is enacted in the disputed relationship because they make judgments based upon how people behave in their relational obligations. When the system and the officials allow this fair judgment to take place, then the community is just.

The problem that a judge will face is how to see rightly. Prejudice or prejudging is a problem with all people. People of wealth, power, position, and even insider/outsider location determine the eyes one sees with and the ears one hears with. The instruction is very clear: do not let partiality cloud your judgment. Small or great, Israelite or alien cannot determine the way one judges. Justice is dependent upon right judgment and right judgment is dependent upon nonpartiality (vv 16-17).

There is a reason that a people who live from the promise of God are called to be just. God himself is just. God, not the judge at the gate or even Moses, is the ultimate judge. A community of promise is to extend Yahweh's promise of blessing to all in just and fair judgments. The promise of blessing and being a blessing is dependent upon justice, and justice is dependent upon judging rightly.

Some cases are too hard and need further examination and judgment (v 17). In these cases the judges are to bring it to Moses. No one person is able to see clearly enough or hear unmistakably enough to judge rightly all of the time. A problem arises when Moses is no longer with Israel; what will Israel do? Joshua will step into the place of Moses, and when Joshua is no longer with Israel, then the judges will step into Joshua's place. When the judges are no longer with Israel, then a king will step into their place. When the kings fail, then the prophets will speak. When the monarchy fails and Israel is judged and taken

into exile, then the hope of a righteous leader is born. A Messiah to judge not by what his eyes see and his ears hear, but with “righteousness” he shall “judge” (Isa 11:3b-4). God is just, and his promise is encased in right judging.

## FROM THE TEXT

In the milieu of this passage it is obvious that Yahweh is just. He judges in the ways that he instructs Israel to judge: not according to partiality, but fairly. He cares for insiders and outsiders, for the great and the small. One could say, based upon the witness of this scripture, that God’s moral makeup is just and right in all of God’s dealings.

God’s people are to live in a way that reflects his covenantal character. They are summoned to become a political reality that fosters justice and righteousness by judging fairly in the community. The prophets understood this covenantal character of God and his people. They make it clear that the righteous and just character of God requires his people, and even the nations of the world, to act justly to all. Justice and righteousness forms not only the center of the prophetic tradition but the Torah itself.

From the story of Abraham and the messengers of Yahweh who argue over Sodom and Gomorrah to the end of the NT witness, justice and righteousness have formed the center of a faith-filled community. This does not mean that justice and righteousness have been easy for the people of God to embody. Humanity is shaped by a picture of the world that fosters a competitive spirit and that believes that there is scarcity of resources rather than an abundance.

World politics demonstrate a willingness to win at all costs, even if that means cruelty and violence. Out of fear, human communities have banded together to fight off the other. Insiders and outsiders have been the environment for war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and concentration camps. Money and position blind the eyes of judges and deafen the ears of politicians. Racism, sexism, and religion have initiated some of the greatest acts of injustice this planet has ever seen.

It is into this world of prejudice and coercive violence that a small group of people dares to keep alive the memory and hope of a world blessed by God. This hopeful memory is a world where justice and equity form the center of a politic, a world where lions and lambs can lie down together and their offspring can live without fear (Isa 11:1-9). In such a politic, there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28). This politic enacts a kingdom where judgment is performed in such a way that the marginal are included, the outcast is embraced, and the prodigal is welcomed home.

This political vision is the seed of the world that is to come. An amazing thing happens when wise, thoughtful people dare to live as if this world is already at hand, as if the Messiah has already appeared in history. A reflection

of this world begins to take place. Slavery is abolished. Women are given the dignity and equality of all humanity. Racism is exposed and repelled. The poor have hope. The rich have compassion. The neighbor is understood as everyone. The enemy becomes a friend, and *shalom* binds all things together.

## D. Fear and Refusal to Enter the Land (1:19-46)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The original account of the mission of the spies is told in Num 13—14. The story found in Deuteronomy draws upon that tradition, but there are a few differences between the two descriptions. In Numbers, Moses is the one who is commanded by God to send out the spies. In Deuteronomy, it is the people who insist that the spies be sent into the land. Another major difference is found in the reason for the mission. In Num 13:17-20 the purpose of the spies is to see if the land is as good as promised and to see if it is fortified. In the account of Deuteronomy the mission is simply to find the best route into the land and the cities located within the land.

The plot line of this story progresses from the order to leave Horeb (Deut 1:19-21), through a diversion of spying out the land (vv 22-25), to the climax of sedition (vv 26-28). The story then takes up the responses to the rebellion by Moses (vv 29-33) and Yahweh (vv 34-40). The final segment of the narrative describes the audacity and defeat of Israel (vv 41-46). What is attention-grabbing in this account is that Israel begins and ends her journey in Kadesh Barnea (vv 19, 46). The narrative points to a meaningless circle that a faithless and disobedient Israel undertakes. Israel advances in such a way that she discovers herself headed back in the direction of the Red Sea to the wilderness.

One of the more confusing problems in the study of the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy is the recurrent alteration in the use of the second-person singular and plural forms in verbs and pronominal suffixes (Christensen 2001, 33-34). The first two instances of this alteration of plural and singular forms are found 1:21 and 1:31. The story uses the plural form until v 21. In this verse it moves to the singular in all instances. Verses 22 and following move the grammar back to the plural form. In v 31 the text again moves to the use of the singular: "There *you* saw how the LORD *your* God carried *you*, as a father carries his son." This verse then transitions to the plural: "all the way *you* went until *you* reached this place." These verses form a frame around the account of Israel's rebellion.

## IN THE TEXT

■ **19** The earlier events of Israel's journey from Mount Horeb to the banks of the Jordan are retold as a case study on fear and doubt. Verse 19 takes up the journey by introducing a key concept into the story: fear. The Hebrew word for fear (*yir'â*) is used three times in this passage (vv 19, 21, 29). In v 19 this word is used to modify the wilderness **that vast and dreadful wilderness**, which is a dangerous and threatening place. What is being confessed is that Yahweh leads his people through this kind of fear-provoking place, so the community does not need to fear when Yahweh directs them to go over into the land of promise (vv 21, 29).

■ **20-21** These verses speak of the arrival of Israel in the oasis of Kadesh Barnea. It is from there that Israel is positioned to enter the land that Yahweh promises to give to them. Within these verses another key concept is introduced: "to give." This word is used four times in this pericope (vv 20, 21, 25, 39). All of these instances indicate that the land is Yahweh's gift to his people. God, not Israel, will bring about the fulfillment of promise. Israel's responsibility is to **go up and take possession of it** (v 21).

To take the land is the reason that this section of the passage ends with: **Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged**. The concept "to take" can either mean to take by force or to inherit. In this text it very likely means both. Readers of Israel's story know that she inherits the land of promise, but she is also required to take it by force. Verse 39 of this pericope helps the reader understand the synergistic meaning of this concept: "I will give it to them, and they will take possession of it."

■ **22-25** Canaan is unknown to the people. The text implies that Moses is eager to pass over into the land to take possession of it, but the people are cautious and want to establish a strategy to take possession of the land. Moses agrees with the wisdom of the plan and chooses a representative from each of the tribes to participate in the reconnaissance mission. In the Valley of Eshkol the spies gathered samples of the land's gifts. They returned to present the bounty of the land and to give personal testimony of the land that they are to "take possession of" (v 21). The land is good!

■ **26-28** These verses witness to the reality that all is in place to take possession of the land, but fear dominates the community. This fearful response of the people is a sin against their God who offers the land. Sin is described in the use of the words **unwilling** and **rebelled** (v 26) and **grumbled** (v 27). This response of Israel takes the reader back to the idea of "take possession," which is both a gift and a risk. The fear of larger people, giants, and fortified cities causes the community to renarrate their understanding of Yahweh.

Because of the **Anakites** (v 28) Israel assumes that Yahweh hates them (v 27) and that his emancipating act from Egypt was a ploy to destroy them. **Anakites** comes from a word that means long neck or giant. They suppose that Yahweh did not act out of love but with a longing to see them destroyed. They could not see God's mighty acts of deliverance and provision, but only giant people and grand cities. What caused such a reinterpretation of Yahweh and his mighty acts of salvation? They must have interpreted "take possession" not as an inheritance to receive but as a task that is dependent upon their own might and resources. If Yahweh demands this task, then he must hate us.

■ **29-33** These verses describe Moses encouraging the community to trust Yahweh, but the immobilization of fear deconstructs Israel's faith. Moses implores the people to trust Yahweh by recalling God's mighty acts on their behalf. Israel is to remember that Yahweh fought for them in Egypt, carried them in the wilderness, and guided them with fire and cloud. He is going before them and fighting in their behalf. The land that they are to take possession of is as an inheritance and not a reward. They will not take possession of the land by their own power and might, but by the hand of God. Nevertheless, the community of Israel could not bring themselves to trust and obey. The giants are too big and the cities are too fortified.

■ **34-40** Up to this point in the story, only Moses, the spies, and the people verbalize their hopes and fears. After hearing the words of mistrust, fear, and rebellion, Yahweh becomes angry and speaks. There are three results of the anger of Yahweh. First, no adult who is alive in the community of Israel will enter into the land of promise (v 35). The only exceptions are Caleb and Joshua. God gives the reason for the exception of Caleb and Joshua in the affirmation of Caleb: **because he followed the LORD wholeheartedly** (v 36). Caleb and Joshua have complete confidence that Yahweh is faithful to his pledge and is able to accomplish what he promises. The contrast between these two and all others is the contrast between faith and faithlessness.

The second result is that Moses himself will be excluded from entry into the land (v 37). The text gives no indication of God's reason as to why Moses is prohibited from entering into the land. The implication is that Yahweh judges Moses with the people, regardless of the fact that Moses acted as God's spokesman and reminded the community of God's faithfulness to her through deliverance and providence. When one attempts to propose any reason for Moses' culpability or God's logic in this passage, it is little more than speculation. The text is silent on this matter.

The final result (v 39) of the lack of faith is a promise of hope: **your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land**. Yahweh's promise is not limited by a single generation. One generation's fear and failure does not control the purpose of God. The promise will be fulfilled, even

though the people are faithless. Yahweh is faithful! The little ones, whom the faithless generation attempted to protect from the losses and anguish of defeat, would turn out to be the future for Israel. Fear must never paralyze one generation in an attempt to protect the next generation. Faith, trust, and obedience to the God of promise are the only hope for the generations that follow. The stark contrast is given between the fearful doubters and the innocent children. The ones most at risk will receive that which has been promised. Moses, in the text, reminds his community that they are the very children who did not know right from wrong. Go and take possession of the land!

■ **41-46** This is the final section of this pericope, and it articulates the response of Israel to the judgment of Yahweh. In the heat of God's judgment Israel repents! There is confession of sin (v 41) and a renewal in support of obedience, but this obedience is turned into conjecture and therefore disobedience. The people, who have twisted the meaning of Yahweh's deliverance from Egyptian slavery and providential care in the wilderness from God's love to God's hatred, cannot now engage in holy war (Miller 1990, 34). Their battle is no longer Yahweh's. Victory will not come to a people who do not trust in the God who delivers.

Israel has refused to go up and take possession of the land. Now when God announces punishment and they are told that they are to turn back, they disobey yet again. What is at stake is trust and fidelity. The God who promised to fight for them now declares: **I will not be with you. You will be defeated by your enemies** (v 42). If Israel fights without Yahweh, it is an act of disbelief and will result in defeat. They will weep, but Yahweh will not hear their cries (v 45). The irony is that Israel's new act of obedience looks a lot like an old act of disobedience.

## FROM THE TEXT

This passage witnesses to God, who delivers, provides, guides, gives, and commands. The response that God is looking for is articulated by the phrase "take possession of [the land]." When taking possession is understood as receiving an inheritance, rather than winning a contest, then one responds like Caleb. This response is not simply being a person of courage but being a person who trusts in the God who promises. The problem is that fear dominates Israel's response to the call of God to go up and "take possession of [the land]." Fear surfaces when people interpret their future possibility through the lens of their resources. For ancient Israel, the size and strength of the people in the land was put side by side to their own rather limited size and strength. This understanding subjugated Israel's judgment. But neither courage nor fear is the virtue needed in this passage. *Faith-full obedience* is the virtue that is called for

from the biblical witness. Trust, not courage, enables one to “go up and take possession” (v 21).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses in his *The Cost of Discipleship* the synergistic relationship between faith and obedience (1959, 57 ff.). What comes first: faith or obedience? One must have faith to be obedient to the call of God, yet it is obedience that allows for faith. Karl Barth, in his *Dogmatics in Outline*, articulates faith as a threefold expression: trust, knowledge, and witness (1959, 15-34). For Barth, trust demands an existential engagement with another. Knowledge is what one trusts about the other. Witness is the embodiment of trust, *faith-filled obedience*, in the world.

The journey of the people of God is one of deliverance, providence, and realization. All along the journey there is the risky call of obedience; an obedience to go, follow, and take possession. The story of the spies bears witness to this kind of existential engagement with Yahweh. Yahweh delivers Israel out of the land of Egypt and provides and guides and promises. Now, the people are called to step out and take possession of the land, to bear witness through this risky act of *faith-full* obedience. “See, the LORD your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the LORD, the God of your fathers, told you” (v 21).

## E. Journey in the Wilderness (2:1—3:22)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Chapter 2 is Moses’ account of both peaceful encounters and great battles as Israel journeys from Kadesh Barnea to the border. Even though many commentators divide this pericope into multiple passages, this interpretation will account for these verses as a whole. The consistent premise of this narrative is Yahweh’s ownership of the land. The outline of this pericope is:

1. The Wilderness Years (2:1-25)
  - a. Passing by the Descendants of Esau (2:1-8a)
  - b. Passing by the Descendants of Lot (2:8b-15)
  - c. Passing by the Ammonites (2:16-23)
2. The Defeating of Two Kings (2:24—3:11)
  - a. Defeat of King Sihon (2:24-37)
  - b. Defeat of King Og (3:1-11)
3. Distribution of the Land East of the Jordan and a Summons to Take the Land (3:12-22)