

Finding humans origins from biblical theology #1

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Around thirty five years ago I noticed something very significant in the book of Deuteronomy (during an uninspiring church Bible study, as it happens), which I'd never heard of before and have seldom come across from others since. It's in ch.5, in which Moses, addressing Israel on the border of the promised land after their wilderness wanderings, restates the Ten Commandments of the Sinai covenant, and says:

Hear, Israel, the decrees and the laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. **It was not with our ancestors that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.** The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. (At that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)

What was odd was that, in the previous chapter, in which Israel's eventual apostasy and exile is gloomily warned, or even foretold (as it certainly is later in the book), a note of hope is added:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; **he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.**

In chapter 5, the newness of the covenant is stressed, giving the superficial impression it's being puffed as a blessing their forbears never had. Yet in ch 4, when the covenant fails, it is a *former* covenant, confirmed by oath – and not the covenant of Horeb – that will be remembered by God as the basis for final salvation. This can only be the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Moses is demonstrating it's better than this new-fangled one he's made. What's going on?

Another thing that suggests ch.5 is contrasting the Mosaic covenant unfavourably with that of Abraham was pointed out to me by a pastor decades later: that in fact the Sinai covenant was made *not*, as Moses says, with “*all of us who are alive here today*”, but with the previous generation 40 years earlier, now nearly all dead. The sense is actually that the Sinai covenant marks a watershed between the good promise to the patriarchs, and what has actually been enacted for the new nation emerging from Egypt.

Now at the time, and for many years, I took this only as indicating the superiority of the New Covenant in Christ – which is a direct descendant of the promise to Abraham, as Paul explicitly says in Galatians 3:8, calling the promise “*the gospel announced in advance*” – over the old dispensation of the Law. I had some idea that, by lumbering Israel with an un-keepable law, the need for grace and the superiority of faith over works of the law would be demonstrated, thus paving the way for the gospel. A bit hard on Israel, but after all, “*He is Yahweh – he will do what seems right to him.*”

I mention this to show why I was so sympathetic, far more recently, to the case John Sailhamer makes in [The Meaning of the Pentateuch](#), and which I mentioned in the recent [Adam and Israel](#) post, that Israel failed to gain the full blessing of an intimate, direct, faith-relationship with Yahweh by falling at the first hurdle and refusing to obey God's command to meet with him "face to face" on the mountain. Instead, they asked Moses to mediate for them, and ended up with all the "bondage" attributed to the law by Paul, including a Tabernacle which separated them from the holiness of God by curtains and priests, rather than a covenant enabling them to dwell in holiness with him.

In other words, in Deuteronomy 5, "*It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant*" is not, after all, expressing their blessing above former generations, but their *fall away* from the living relationship the Patriarchs possessed. The Sinai covenant was only ever a patch to cover failure – or as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:19, "*the law was added later because of transgressions*".

And not just any old transgressions, but the one that stares us in the face in Deut. 5. Remember that the whole of Deuteronomy so far has been about the shortcomings of Israel – their refusal to fight the Amorites, leading to their 40-year wandering; their various rebellions during those wanderings and God's insistence that the whole Exodus generation should die in the desert and not "enter his rest"; Moses himself being denied entry "*because of you*"; and the warnings already mentioned about idolatry and exile.

In ch.5, although the NIV puts it in brackets, v5 actually explains the central reason why they *have* all these problems and potential failures rather than a vibrant intimacy with God like that of Abraham:

At that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.

Just as Sailhamer argues in detail, they hear the voice of God, respond with fear (a verbal parallel with Gen 3:10) instead of faith and obedience to his command to join him on the mountain, and end up with the covenant which Moses goes on to describe in terms of the Decalogue. Their offloading of responsibility for relating to God is reiterated in 5:24ff. They promise there to obey everything Moses says, and it is that promise which the Lord commends in v.28 as "good" – but significantly he immediately adds, "*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever.*" God knows, after all, that the golden calf is soon coming.

Deut. 29:4 shows the hollowness of this desire of the Lord's:

But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.

And so, when we have eyes to see, Deuteronomy contains all the seeds of the law v gospel teaching of Paul in Romans and Galatians: the relationship of faith that the Patriarchs had, but Israel did not; the need for grace and a new heart; and (as Sailhamer details) the need for a future king/prophet who will be able to put all this right and restore not only Israel, but God's plan for all mankind in the world.

The *Torah*, then, carries as its core message God's desire to break down the barrier between heaven and earth, between God and mankind, through Israel; Israel's rebellion and lack of faith; and God's future provision of a new covenant through grace and through a coming Messiah. That makes Christian study of "the Old Testament law" truly the study of the Gospel, integrating the whole Bible into the message of Christ according, it seems, to the original intentions of the authors. That astonishes me, and such study is enough to keep any of us established in the truth of God's word for life.

But we have a further agenda here, though one entirely consistent with it. As I discussed in the recent post linked above, our biblical Creation stories occur in the context of that *Torah*, with the gospel-message I have tried to establish for it in this piece. And in the NT, of the two main expositions of the law-gospel question, Galatians and Romans, the latter bases one of its arguments on the whole question of Adam. It is that key link of the beginning of the *torah* with the theology of the gospel that convinces many Christians open to evolution, such as Tim Keller (notoriously in recent weeks) that an historical Adam is essential to the faith.

I gave some reasons in the *Adam and Israel* post as to why that is so: Adam as a forerunner to the grace shown to Israel, their failure to receive it and their exile pending the coming of a new Adam/new Israel really makes no sense if Adam is an allegorical Everyman, whose sole purpose is to show the reality of sin.

There would be no reason to invent him to make the point about Israel, though there would be good reason for referring back to him to draw parallels. In Genesis, as I tried to show in the [subsequent post](#), the theological purpose I began to see dimly all those years ago is to show Adam as one given special privileges *above and beyond the blessing of being created in God's image* and blowing it. And he blows it not only for himself, but for all other people "in the state of nature" (including Israel, whose rebellion is both an echo and a result of Adam, for "*sin came into the world by one man*").

It seems to me that this understanding of Genesis gives some new lines of enquiry for placing the biblical accounts in the context of human history, because like the *torah* as a whole, we are looking at the beginning of Genesis for introductory teaching on the role of Israel *in the world*. If Israel's failure was a failure to find their role as a "*kingdom of priests*" (Ex 19.6) to the gentile world, we should *expect* to see Adam pictured in a similar light. We should expect Genesis to be as concerned with the creation of those *not* involved in Eden as Deuteronomy is with those nations *not* to be blessed through Israel as a holy nation, and we should expect a distinction between the two – as once more I suggested in that former post in the contrast between the spiritual conditions of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

We should expect, in other words, the Bible to favour some interpretations of human origins over others: it's not simply a question of "paying yer money and taking yer choice". I hope to develop this theme in further posts in this series.

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