

BIBLE PROPHECY IN DEUTERONOMY

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

The Bible is God's true story of His plan for human history. In the progress of revelation He gave a quick overview in the oldest book in the canon via a divine interpretation of the life and experiences of Job. The Lord then revealed the first five books of Scripture to Moses that we know as the books of the Law. The rest of the Old Testament is built upon its source of the Mosaic Covenant as expressed in Deuteronomy. Along with Genesis, it is impossible to properly understand the Bible as a whole without a realization of the role that God's Law to Israel plays as a foundation for the rest of God's revelation, especially when it comes to Bible prophecy.

THE COVENANT OF DEUTERONOMY

God's relationship with man is always mediated through one or more of the biblical covenants. Covenants relate to biblical prophecy in a big way. God has contracted to perform certain things in history and prophecy which concerns itself with how and when these promises will ultimately be fulfilled.

What is the nature of the biblical covenants? First, covenants are contracts between individuals for the purpose of governing that relationship. God wants to bind Himself to His people to keep His promises so that He can demonstrate in history what kind of God He is. Second, relationships in the Bible, especially between God and man, are legal or judicial. This is why they are mediated through covenants or contract agreements. Covenants usually involve intent, promises, and sanctions.

Although there are three kinds of covenants in the Bible, I want to focus on the SUZERAIN-VASSAL Treaty of the second millennium B.C. Unlike the Abrahamic, it is a conditional covenant binding an inferior vassal to a superior suzerain and was binding only on the one who swore. When we look at the Suzerain/Vassal treaty format of Deuteronomy we see the following breakdown: 1) Preamble (1:1-5), 2) Historical Prologue (1:6-4:49), 3) Main Provisions (5:1-26:19), Blessings and Curses (27:1-30:20), and 5) Covenant Continuity (31:1-33:29).

ISRAEL'S PROPHETIC OUTLINE

Normally in the historical prologue section the suzerain rehearses the history of dealings in the past between the two parties. The Lord does the same with Israel in 1:6—4:25, however, He adds a prophetic overview of what will take place in the future in relation to God's relationship with Israel in 4:25–31. The outline of Israel's future history is laid out by the Lord before they ever entered their land. Of course, this is no problem for a Sovereign God like the Lord. A summary of these events would be as follows:

- 1) Israel and her descendants would remain long in the land.
- 2) Israel would act corruptly and slip into idolatry.
- 3) Israel would be kicked out of the land.
- 4) The LORD will scatter them among the nations.
- 5) Israel would be given over to idolatry during their wanderings.
- 6) While dispersed among the nations, Israel would seek and find the LORD when they search for Him with all their heart.

- 7) There would come a time of *tribulation*, said to occur in the latter days, during which time they would turn to the LORD
- 8) "For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them" (Deut. 4:31).

If the first five events have happened to Israel—and no one would deny that they have—then it is clear from the text that the final events will also occur to the same people in the same way. This is most clear from the context. The Bible does not “change horses in midstream” so that suddenly Israel who has received the curses, is dropped out of the picture and the church takes over and receives the blessings. Despite various systems of theology, the Bible nowhere teaches that God has forsaken Israel. Any reader of the text will have to admit that the same identity is referred to throughout the whole of the text under examination. If it is true that the same Israel is meant throughout the text, then the last three events have yet to be fulfilled for Israel in the same historical way in which the first five events are recognized by all to have taken place. Thus, a fulfillment of the final three events in the life of Israel will have to happen in the future. Israel was not rescued as a result of tribulation in A.D. 70; instead she was judged. Deuteronomy 4 pictures a return to the Lord after tribulation, not judgment. This means that a futurist view of the tribulation is supported from this early passage.

FURTHER PROPHECY IN DEUTERONOMY

As significant as Deuteronomy 4 is in establishing the tribulation and its purpose, an expanded narrative of Israel future history is provided in Deuteronomy 28—32. “The last seven chapter of Deuteronomy (28–34),” says David Larsen, “are really the matrix out of which the great prophecies of the Old Testament regarding Israel emerge.”¹ Dr. Larsen provides the following breakdown of Israel’s future history from this section in Deuteronomy:

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| 26:3–13; 28:1–14 | The conditions of blessing to follow obedience |
| 31:16–21 | The coming apostasy |
| 28:15–60 | The affliction that God would bring upon Israel, while still in the land, because of her apostasy |
| 28:32–39, 48–57 | Israel will be taken captive |
| 27; 32 | The enemies of Israel will possess her land for a time |
| 28:38–42; 29:23 | The land itself will remain desolate |
| 28:63–67; 32:26 | Israel will be scattered among the nations |
| 28:62 | The time will come when Israel will be “few in number” |
| 28:44–45 | Though punished, Israel will not be destroyed if she repents |
| 28:40–41; 30:1–2 | Israel will repent in her tribulation |
| 30:3–10 | Israel will be gathered from the nations and brought back to her divinely given land ² |

Within Deuteronomy 28—30 we see a specific reference to the tribulation when it says, “And the LORD your God will inflict all these curses [Deut. 28] on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you” (Deut. 30:7). Moses tells us that the tribulation will include in its purposes a time of retribution to the Gentiles for their ill treatment of the Jews. This certainly did not take place at all either during the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem or at any time in past history as some may claim! Thus, we see it as a time of preparation for the Jews leading to their conversion and deliverance.

It appears to be shaping up that while the A.D. 70 event was indeed prophesied in Scripture, it is not the same as the tribulation. Dr. George Harton concludes: “Inasmuch as Deuteronomy 28—30 is merely a restatement and amplification of this same promise in Deuteronomy 4, it may be concluded that Deuteronomy 28:15–68 will have an eschatological fulfillment.”³

MORE PROPHECY

Deuteronomy 30:1–10 lays out a clear end-time scenario that is fairly extensive. This section speaks of a future time when Israel will repent of her sins and return to the Lord (30:1–2), “then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity and have compassion on you and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you” (30:3). At the time when they are brought back to the land of Israel, it says, “the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you might live” (30:6). The text then describes one of the purposes for the tribulation in relation to the Gentiles is because “the Lord your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you” (30:7). When Israel is back in the land, after the tribulation living in obedience to the Lord in the millennial kingdom the Bible tells us “Then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, . . .” (30:9). The passage goes on to speak further of the great blessings the nation will experience during what we later learn is the millennial kingdom period of history.

CONCLUSION

The book of Deuteronomy provides an outline of Israel’s history before they ever cross the Jordan and enter their land as a nation for the first time over three and a half thousand years ago. Much of what was prophesied about the national course of Israel’s history has already taken place in the first two thousand years of their existence. Now, after three and a half thousand years, there are a number of items that have never been fulfilled yet. As the Lord continued to reveal the rest of the Old Testament books of Scripture to Israel, the prophetic sections have been greatly expanded upon and they have never departed from the original outline provided in Deuteronomy.

Further, the New Testament also does not ever change or deviate from the prophetic outline provided early on in Deuteronomy. The New Testament does add the prophetic details of the Church, which is said in Paul’s Epistles to have not been revealed in the Old Testament since it was a mystery revealed only in the New Testament (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:4–6; Col. 1:24–27). Nowhere in the New Testament does Scripture say that God has forever rejected Israel, Israel’s national promises, nor their land promises. In fact, Paul says of Israel: “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:2a). All of this leads to only one conclusion: The Lord will yet redeem the remnant of Jewish Believers and literally fulfill their national and land promises, no matter how

impossible it may appear in relation to the modern state of Israel. This means a lot of Bible prophecy regarding Israel is still in our future. Maranatha!

ENDNOTE

¹ David Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles, & The Church* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), p. 23

² Larsen, *Jews, . . .*, pp. 23-24.

³ George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology," Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, August 1981, p. 233.