

The background of the cover is a religious painting. In the upper right, an angel with large, dark, feathered wings and white robes is shown. Below the angel, a woman with curly blonde hair and a halo is depicted, looking towards the left. In the foreground, a man with a long, dark beard and hair, wearing a red robe, is shown in profile, looking towards the woman. The scene is set in a dark, cavernous or rocky environment with dramatic lighting.

DENNIS
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DEUTERONOMY
*God, Blessings, and
Curses*

THE RATIONAL
BIBLE

THE ALPERSON EDITION

CHAPTER

I

This is the last of the five books of the Torah, the most influential body of literature in history. Deuteronomy is particularly significant because it is, in effect, Moses's last will and testament to Israel and, for that matter, to the world.

The name Deuteronomy comes from the Greek words for “second law” or “second teaching” (deuteros = second; nomos = law). Moses himself describes this book as a “second teaching” (Deuteronomy 17:18), which is how ancient Jews referred to the book. It is the “second teaching” because it is Moses's review of many of the laws found in the previous books of the Torah (as well as additional laws and teachings).

Just about every aspect of life—religion, morality, happiness, anger, judgment—is contained in Deuteronomy. And the most important document of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, is repeated here.

As there is virtually no narrative in Deuteronomy—only laws and beliefs—it is not necessary to read Deuteronomy straight through. I therefore suggest that general readers (as opposed to students of the Bible) first look for subject headings that interest them and proceed from there.

WHY MOSES INTRODUCED NEW LAWS AND NEW IDEAS

1.1 These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel

Deuteronomy consists of three final addresses given by Moses to the Israelites. In addition to reviewing laws and giving new laws, he offered his perspective

on the people’s travels and travails. Deuteronomy is, therefore, composed overwhelmingly of Moses’s words. But due to Moses’s uniquely close relationship with God—“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses whom the Lord singled out face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10)—these words can be regarded as having divine approval for inclusion in the Torah.

As to why Moses gave new commandments in Deuteronomy, the Bible commentator Nachmanides (Ramban, 1194–1270, Spain and Israel) explained: “The reason the new commandments were not mentioned in earlier books . . . is that perhaps these commandments, though incumbent on the individual wherever he might be, were not actually practiced until they entered the land. Moses did not mention them until it was time for the generations of those who left Egypt to take possession of the land.”

Thus, for example, Moses introduced certain offerings to be brought to the Temple with the words, “*When* you enter the land which I am giving you to settle in . . .” (Numbers 15:2, emphasis added). So, then, my understanding of Deuteronomy is that it consists of Moses’s words (except when God is directly quoted). No matter when or how it was written, it has the divine imprimatur, and is therefore part of the Torah.

DID MOSES WRITE EVERY WORD OF DEUTERONOMY?

on the other side of the Jordan

The words “on the other side of the Jordan [River]” have presented scholars, both modern and medieval, with an obvious question. The medieval Bible scholar Ibn Ezra (1089–1167, Spain) posed the question this way: If Moses wrote every word in the Torah, why would he use the phrase “on the other side of the Jordan”? That implied that Moses was writing from inside the Jordan River, i.e., Israel—not “the other side.” But Moses was never in Israel.

Citing Ibn Ezra, the British Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs wrote: “This expression makes sense only to someone writing in Israel, which Moses never entered. This would appear to suggest some parts of the Torah were written after Moses. Ibn Ezra appears to accept this, but because it is a very radical

departure from the tradition [that Moses wrote the Torah], he remarks on it only by hint.”¹

There are two ways of dealing with the dilemma cited by Ibn Ezra.² One is that Moses could simply have written whatever God instructed him to write, including writing of the Canaanites in the past tense (“And the Canaanite was then in the land”—Genesis 12:6), as well as details of his own death and burial. The other is to accept that Joshua or someone else wrote some of the Torah’s words after Moses’s death.

As I write in the introduction, I am not concerned with the who or how of the Torah’s composition. I am concerned that it be regarded as a divine document. That is what matters.

—through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.

1.2 It is eleven days from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea by the Mount Seir route.—

The Hebrew Bible uses Horeb interchangeably with Mount Sinai.

Kadesh-barnea is at the entrance to the southern border of Canaan. Moses stated that it takes only eleven days to get there from Sinai. The reason he did so is obvious. In the words of the ancient rabbinic commentary Sifre, “Had Israel been worthy, they could have entered the Land within eleven days; but they were sadly found wanting, and they drew upon themselves the punishment of forty years’ wandering.”

1.3 It was in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, that Moses addressed the Israelites in accordance with the instructions that the Lord had given him for them,

1.4 after he had defeated Sihon king of the Amorites, who dwelt in Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan, who dwelt at Ashtaroth [and] Edrei.

The Hebrew of this verse is ambiguous: Is Moses or God credited with defeating Sihon? This English translation spells “he” with a lowercase “h,” meaning

the translators believe the reference is to Moses. In any case, Moses mentions these victories to remind the Israelites of all that God did for them.

The Torah’s description of the defeat of Sihon and Og is in the Book of Numbers, the book immediately preceding Deuteronomy (Numbers 21:21–35; see also Numbers 32:33). Although Moses alludes to this victory yet again in Deuteronomy 3, the story of the conquest of Canaan is related in the Book of Joshua, the biblical book immediately following Deuteronomy.

ON THE NEED TO EXPLAIN THE TORAH

1.5 On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching.

The most revered Jewish Bible commentator, Rashi (1040–1105, France), wrote that the meaning of “expound this Torah (‘Teaching’)” here and in Deuteronomy 27:8 was that Moses had the Torah translated into seventy languages. “Seventy nations” is the traditional way of referring to all the world’s nations.³ In other words, Jews are obligated to bring the Torah to the world. And since the world’s nations will relate only to a text that is perceived as rational, it is imperative to explain (“expound”) the Torah—and its laws. The entire premise of this commentary, *The Rational Bible*—that the Torah is to be explained to the world if there is any chance of goodness prevailing on Earth—is not some idiosyncratic view of mine, but the normative view of Jews going back thousands of years.

The related question of whether one should seek rational explanations for all the Torah’s laws is the subject of three extended essays:

“Do People Need to Understand Religious Rituals?” (Numbers 19:2).

“Do All of the Torah’s Laws Have Reasons?” (Deuteronomy 4:1).

“What Does It Mean to Be ‘Wise in the Eyes of the Nations?’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

It is also the subject of the commentary to Deuteronomy 27:8.

MOSES'S FIRST ADDRESS

He said:

This marks the beginning of Moses's first address, which lasts until Deuteronomy 4:40.

1.6 The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain.

1.7 Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the river Euphrates.

1.8 See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to them and to their heirs after them.

As noted on a number of occasions, the purpose of taking possession of the Promised Land was to enable the Israelites to build a society that would be a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Therefore, if the Israelites engaged in immoral behavior, they too would be dispossessed (see, for example, Leviticus 18:28).

1.9 Thereupon I said to you, "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself.

Moses said, "I said to *you* at that time" (italics added), even though most of the people he was addressing were not alive at the time he was discussing. Moses spoke this way throughout his address, mixing past, present, and future generations, because he was addressing every generation who will ever read Deuteronomy.

In the words of Bible scholar Richard Elliott Friedman (professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia): "The concept of a 'nation' or 'people' is a fluid one, crossing lines of generations. Like a river, which is constantly being made up of new molecules of water yet is always the same river... so a people

retains its identity even though its individual members are constantly changing over time.”⁴

1.10 The Lord your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky.—

“Numerous as the stars in the sky” is an expression, not a literal statement. See the commentary to Genesis 22:17.

1.11 May the Lord, the God of your fathers, increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as He promised you.—

Although Moses asserted that the Israelites’ great numbers became a burden, he nonetheless asked God to continue to increase their numbers. Despite his periodic exasperation and anger with the Israelites, Moses remained their great advocate.

1.12 How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!

Of all the problems the Israelites presented to Moses, it was their constant arguing (“bickering” here) and complaining that most angered him. Anyone who lives with a querulous individual at home or at work can well understand Moses.

ESSAY: A GOOD SOCIETY IS UNATTAINABLE WITHOUT WISDOM

1.13 Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.”

In Moses’s recounting, God did not tell him to pick *good* men to be leaders. Wouldn’t being a good person be one of the major attributes, if not *the* major attribute, one would seek in a leader? While the Torah takes for granted that a leader should be a good person, goodness is not sufficient. That is why *all three traits listed here concern wisdom*. There is an extraordinarily important lesson here—one of the most important in the Torah and in life: A good society is unattainable without wisdom.

That is why God told Moses to choose wise men rather than good men. There have always been people who were personally good—individuals who had good intentions and even a kindly disposition—who enabled evil to prevail.

Let me offer two examples, one personal and one global.

I have interviewed recovering drug and alcohol addicts, many of whom told me one reason they continued their drug or alcohol use was that their family enabled them. People who enable addicts often hurt them. This damage is done by people with good and loving intentions.

Quite aside from addiction, parents who coddle or spoil their children don't necessarily lack goodness or good intentions; they lack wisdom.

A good society is unattainable without wisdom.

In the global sphere, the most obvious modern example of the devastating effects of good intentions without wisdom has been communism, which killed about one hundred million innocent people, non-combatants all, and enslaved a billion more. Communist tyrants had tens of millions of supporters within their countries and around the world. Most communist leaders were power-hungry, cruel, and evil people, and many of their supporters were immoral sycophants. But a significant number of people supported communism because they thought it would make a better world.

Parents who coddle or spoil their children don't necessarily lack goodness or good intentions; they lack wisdom.

For many of its supporters, communism was rooted in a desire to do good. The many millions of people all over the world who supported communism did not think they were supporting unprecedented levels of mass murder and torture, or the near-total deprivation of the most fundamental human rights for a substantial percentage of humanity. They thought they were supporting the creation of a beautiful future for humanity. They were convinced the moral arc of history was

bending in their direction and that they were good people because their motives were good.

What supporters of communism lacked was wisdom. With regard to morality, not to mention economics, they had no wisdom. They were fools. Western supporters of communism were frequently labeled “useful idiots”—a term frequently attributed to Vladimir Lenin, the father of Russian communism. This is not a description of their totality as human beings. Fools may be personally kind and generous, may be loyal friends and devoted spouses, and may, of course, be well-intentioned. But in terms of making the world worse, there is little difference between a well-meaning fool and an evil human being. Among the tens of millions of Westerners who supported Joseph Stalin, more than a

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few were well-intentioned. The Westerners who supplied Stalin with the secrets to the atomic bomb were not all motivated by evil. But few truly evil people did as much harm to mankind as they did.

One should add that communists also lacked a fixed moral code and a transcendent moral code. Good and evil were what communist parties said they were. Lenin often said that good and evil were defined as whatever

furthered the interests of the working class, interests entirely defined by the Communist Party, whose policy was, in turn, entirely defined by Lenin and later by Stalin. That is why millions of communists who were virulently anti-Nazi in the 1930s changed their policy overnight when Stalin signed a peace treaty with Adolf Hitler in August 1939, a peace treaty that enabled Hitler to start World War II a week later. The combination of no fixed moral code, no God-based ethic, and a lack of wisdom is a demonic combination, even when the person holding such views is kind, honest, and loving on an individual level.

As difficult and uncomfortable as it may be to believe, good intentions can even apply to some—I emphasize *some*—Germans who supported the Nazis in the early 1930s. Not every German who voted for Hitler and the Nazis in the late 1920s and early 1930s was voting for the mass murder of the Jews or

anyone else. Many Germans were voting for a better Germany as they understood it. Every historian I have read on the subject emphasizes that Hitler toned down his Jew-hatred in order to appeal to German voters. In fact, in the last free vote prior to the Nazis' ascent to power, the Nazi Party lost thirty-four seats in the German parliament (the Reichstag).

Germans who voted for Hitler and who were not primarily animated by Jew-hatred were fools for not recognizing how evil the Nazis were. Consequently, they contributed as much to making World War II and the Holocaust possible as the Germans who were animated by Jew-hatred. Such is the legacy of a lack of wisdom.

As regards making a good world (and a good person), wisdom is not only more important than good intentions; it is also more important than knowledge. Most people—especially intellectuals—confuse wisdom with knowledge, which is why, for example, it is widely believed that people who hold a doctorate are wiser than people who do not. But Western supporters of communism were disproportionately intellectuals: highly educated Westerners were the group most likely to support communist tyrants.

No one devoted more research into intellectuals' support of communism and communist dictators than Paul Hollander, a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts and an associate of Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Hollander, an outlier among intellectuals, described "the apparently limitless capacity of idealistic human beings... to engage in wishful thinking and substantial political misjudgment."⁵

Two of the many examples Hollander cited are H. G. Wells—who, after an interview with Stalin, proclaimed that Stalin's rule was all the more remarkable "since no one is afraid of him and everybody trusts him"—and

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John K. Fairbank, a Harvard professor who was the leading Chinese studies scholar in America during and after World War II. Fairbank wrote in 1972, fifteen years after Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward that cost about fifty million Chinese lives, that "Americans may find in China's collective life today an ingredient of personal moral concern for one's neighbor that has a lesson for us all."

It is inconceivable that the notion that "all men are created equal" would have entered the Western mind without the biblical teaching that every human being is created "in God's image."

Hollander's conclusion: "There is no shortage of noxious blather peddled by Western intellectuals."

That is why the Torah and the rest of the Bible are so important. While there are other sources of wisdom, from the Buddha to Shakespeare, the Bible has been the greatest source of wisdom and the moral foundation of the Western world. To cite just one example, it is inconceivable that the notion that "all men are created equal" would have entered the Western mind without the biblical teaching that every human being is created "in God's image" (Genesis 1:27 and 9:6). However, as a result of

the secularization of the West, the conflation of knowledge with wisdom, and the increasing reliance on feelings as guides to behavior, the Bible is rarely studied outside of religious Jewish and Christian circles. The results have been disastrous, as the West produces more and more highly educated individuals who lack wisdom.

1.14 You answered me and said, "What you propose to do is good."

1.15 So I took your tribal leaders, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you: chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens, and officials for your tribes.

1.16 I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, "Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger."

A “stranger” was a non-Israelite residing among Israelites. Moses instructed that there was to be no double standard of justice—one for fellow Israelites and another for outsiders. This was a radical and unprecedented revolution in the human understanding of the humanity, let alone the rights, of the outsider. Justice in society begins in the courtroom. For example, in nineteenth-century America, justice was routinely denied to Chinese immigrants; in some states, they were not allowed to testify in court. This behavior was exactly what the Torah outlawed.

There is another moral innovation here. The verse underscores that non-Israelites who lived among the Israelites were allowed to remain as they were: they did not have to become Jews.

1.17 You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike.

Literally translated, the words “you shall not be partial in judgment” mean “do not recognize the face of anyone in judgment.” A judge is not allowed to rule in a case in which he personally knows one of the parties. The judge must either recuse himself, or, if no other judges are available, make sure to judge as if he does not know the person.

It also means that a judge may not give preferential treatment to a famous or wealthy person. The words translated “hear out low and high alike” literally read, “listen to the small person as you listen to the great person.” By definition, justice means equal justice for everyone and that all people have an equal right to be heard. Even the poorest and seemingly unimportant person must have access to the judicial system. The same holds true in the other direction: a judge may not favor a poor man, no matter how wealthy his litigation opponent happens to be (see Exodus 23:3 and Leviticus 19:15).

The Torah emphasizes that fear of God must supersede all other fears. It is this fear that ensures we do not permit fear of a human being to cause us to support, let alone engage in, evil.

ESSAY: FEAR OF GOD IS MORALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY NECESSARY

Fear no man, for judgment is God's.

Every normal person fears someone or something. Precisely because fears are natural and universal, the Torah emphasizes that fear of God must supersede all other fears. It is this fear that ensures we do not permit fear of a human being to cause us to support, let alone engage in, evil.

The Egyptian people, fearing Pharaoh, obeyed his command to drown Israelite babies in the Nile, while the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, who feared God more than they feared Pharaoh, saved babies (Exodus 1:15–22). In the twentieth century, if more Germans had feared God more than they did Hitler,

If more Germans feared God more than they did Hitler, and if more Russians feared God more than they did Lenin and Stalin, the murders of tens of millions of people would not have occurred.

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A German Christian pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged because he would not obey the Nazis. He feared (and loved) God more than he feared the Nazis. Unfortunately—both for the Jews and for the moral record of Christianity—too few German Christians feared God more than they feared the Nazis.

Fear of God helps to deter people from committing evil in a very different circumstance: when the person

whom they are tempted to hurt is powerless, making resistance or retribution impossible. That is why “you shall fear God” is appended to the prohibition of actions where it is virtually certain that the perpetrator will not be apprehended by human authorities. Two such examples are found in Leviticus 19:14: “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind [but] you shall fear your God.” A blind person has no idea who injured him. Therefore, God appends to the prohibition a reminder to fear Him, who does see what we do.

The same applies to one who insults (or “curses,” as the Hebrew literally puts it) the deaf. “[But] you shall fear God” is appended to laws protecting

society's weakest members, including slaves and servants (Leviticus 25:42–43), as well as the deaf and the blind. Throughout history, mistreated servants and slaves had no recourse to justice. The Torah therefore instructs employers to fear God, who sees and judges everyone.

Only the naïve believe fear of a just God who judges people—“for judgment is God’s,” as this verse states—has no moral impact. It would be like saying that fear of the police has no impact on the way in which people behave.

Fear of God is also psychologically indispensable.

It seems that secular societies produce more fearful people. For example, though I cannot prove a direct cause and effect, it is clear that as America and the West have become more secular, parents have far more fears regarding their children than they did in a more religious America and West. To cite just a few examples, parents today are far more likely to fear letting their children take unsupervised walks, play on seesaws and monkey bars, jump off diving boards, and fear sleeping alongside their babies (lest they smother the infant). Many parents fear their child will be traumatized by losing in sporting events. Many communities do not allow keeping score of soccer games in which children under twelve participate, lest the children on the losing team experience too much emotional pain.⁶

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More parents today fear their child’s receiving lower grades and fear their child’s traveling alone. Regarding the latter, when I was seven years old, I flew alone from New York to Miami and back. While even then not all parents would have allowed this, few found it particularly strange, let alone irresponsible of my parents. At this time, a child as old as fourteen must be registered

with the airline, signed in by a parent at the airport, and accompanied off the plane by an airline employee.

People who struggle to believe in God but who believe they cannot do so are worthy of respect. People who deny the importance of God are not.

A particularly dramatic example, if not proof, of greater fears among the secular was the dramatically different responses of secular and religious people to the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious Jews and Christians were far less accepting of the draconian lockdown orders that profoundly circumscribed normal life and rendered tens of millions of people unemployed.

The combination of secularism, higher education, and affluence seems to produce more people who are afraid of emotional pain, and even of marrying and having children.

People who struggle to believe in God but who believe they cannot do so are worthy of respect. People who deny the importance of God are not. They are fooling themselves, leading vast numbers of people to unhappiness and leading society toward moral chaos.

And any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it.”

1.18 Thus I instructed you, at that time, about the various things that you should do.

1.19 We set out from Horeb and traveled the great and terrible wilderness that you saw, along the road to the hill country of the Amorites, as the Lord our God had commanded us. When we reached Kadesh-barnea,

1.20 I said to you, “You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the Lord our God is giving to us.

1.21 See, the Lord your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed.”

WAS SENDING SPIES INTO CANAAN GOD’S IDEA OR MOSES’S?

1.22 Then all of you came to me and said, “Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to.”

1.23 I approved of the plan, and so I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe.

Moses then recounted the unfortunate episode of the spies who were sent to scout out the Promised Land (Numbers 13–14). There are discrepancies between the account in Numbers and Moses’s account here. In Numbers, it was God who commanded Moses to send the spies; here, Moses says the idea came from the Israelites. As is often the case, modern Bible scholars tend to point to these discrepancies as evidence that the Torah is a composite of different documents written by different authors.

One obvious response is that even if there were different source documents here, the final editor or editors (the “Redactor”) would surely also have noticed such a glaring difference between Numbers and Deuteronomy and changed one of the narratives so that it would not conflict with the other. (To which these scholars would likely respond that although the text was edited, it was not always possible to reconcile inconsistencies because they had already attained a quasi-canonical status.)

I see the reason for the discrepancy as much simpler and, I believe, more honest to the narrative: Deuteronomy is Moses’s repetition of the narrative *in his words, and therefore according to his understanding*. No human being relates events of the past precisely as they happened. If anything, the differences that exist in the spies’ story argue more for the authenticity of the text: this is Moses’s take on the spies’ story. And his take gives us further insight both into those events and into Moses.

1.24 They made for the hill country, came to the wadi Eshcol, and spied it out.

1.25 They took some of the fruit of the land with them and brought it down to us. And they gave us

this report: “It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving to us.”

1.26 Yet you refused to go up, and flouted the command of the Lord your God.

Moses seems to be recounting the episode in a manner somewhat unfair to the majority of the Israelites. In truth, only two of the spies brought back fully favorable reports, emphasizing both that the land was good and that the Israelites should go to war to conquer it. In contrast, the ten other spies claimed that while it was true that the land was fertile and produced beautiful fruit, far more significant was the fact that it was full of giants and warriors who would defeat the Israelites.

Apparently, Moses decided to describe the spies’ report as favorable in order to place the blame on the people for their unwillingness to conquer the land. From Moses’s point of view (and God’s, since God punished the people in Numbers for their lack of faith), the people were at fault—despite the spies’ faithless report.

1.27 You sulked in your tents and said, “It is because the Lord hates us that He brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to wipe us out.

1.28 What kind of place are we going to? Our kinsmen have taken the heart out of us, saying, ‘We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even Anakites.’”

1.29 I said to you, “Have no dread or fear of them.

1.30 None other than the Lord your God, who goes before you, will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your very eyes,

1.31 and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place.

1.32 Yet for all that, you have no faith in the Lord your God,

1.33 who goes before you on your journeys—to scout the place where you are to encamp—in fire by night and in cloud by day, in order to guide you on the route you are to follow.”

ESSAY: WHEN ANGER—DIVINE AND HUMAN—IS APPROPRIATE

1.34 When the Lord heard your loud complaint, He was angry.

Christian Bible professor Gary Hall comments that the depiction of God as an angry God is firmly embedded in the Hebrew Bible; the Book of Deuteronomy alone refers to God’s anger twenty-six times. In Hall’s view, however, God’s anger is not a flaw; sometimes anger is the only appropriate response to people’s behavior. Would we want to live in a society whose citizenry was not outraged at rapists and child molesters? Hall’s insight is important because historically many Christians distinguished between an “angry God” of the Old Testament and a “loving God” of the New Testament—as if anger and love are mutually exclusive.

But, of course, they are not. The morality of anger, like that of virtually everything else in life, is determined by its context. Love of one’s neighbor or of anyone kind is a beautiful thing; love of Stalin or Hitler is repulsive. “Those of you who love God—hate evil,” the Bible tells us (Psalm 97:10). Anger at evil is morally necessary; anger not morally driven is immoral. In Saul Bellow’s memorable words, “A man is only as good as what he loves.”⁷

Instances of morally appropriate anger in the Hebrew Bible include:

—Anger at ingratitude: Laban prospered from Jacob’s twenty-year-long stewardship of his flocks, yet never thanked Jacob. Instead, he tried to lower Jacob’s wages and cheat him out of the livestock he was due. In response, “Jacob became incensed and took up his grievance with Laban...” (Genesis 31:36–42).

—Anger against slander: Moses was outraged by the rebels Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who slandered Moses when they asserted that he used his position

to aggrandize himself. Moses was much “aggrieved,” the Torah tells us, and asked God to pay no attention to their gift offerings (Numbers 16:15).

—Anger at people who mistreat the poor: The prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of an angry God, said: “That which was robbed from the poor is in your houses. How dare you crush My people and grind the faces of the poor?” says the Lord, God of Hosts.”⁸

—Anger at Israelite idolatry: God was furious at King Solomon, who, in his later years, built idolatrous shrines in Israel: “The Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.”⁹

The man widely regarded as the greatest Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1138–1204, Spain and Egypt), described those who never become angry as “corpse-like” because it is neither natural nor moral never to become angry. However, we should become angry, in Maimonides’s words, only “for a grave cause that rightly calls for indignation, so that the like shall not be done again.”¹⁰

Maimonides’s view of anger was probably influenced by Aristotle, of whose writings he was a lifelong student. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote: “A person is praised who is angry for the right reasons, with the right people, in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time.”¹¹

While righteous anger is righteous, nevertheless, like God, we should be “slow to anger,” a description of God that appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible:

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: ‘The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, *slow to anger*, abounding in kindness and faithfulness...’” (Exodus 34:6).

“The Lord! *slow to anger* and abounding in kindness...” (Numbers 14:18).

“But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

God “is gracious and merciful, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love...” (Joel 2:13).

He vowed:

1.35 Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers—

1.36 none except Caleb son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his descendants will I give the land on which he set foot, because he remained loyal to the Lord.

Joshua's name is not mentioned here—it is mentioned two verses later—even though he, along with Caleb, gave an optimistic report about the land.

1.37 Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it either.

Numbers 20:6–12 clearly indicates that Moses's punishment was a consequence of what he declared when extracting water from the rock: attributing the miracle to himself and Aaron rather than to God. Here, however, Moses seems to be connecting his not entering the Promised Land with the Israelites' behavior in the incident of the spies.

Moses, like people throughout history, did not recount events strictly in linear fashion, but deviated briefly here to mention his being prohibited from entering the Promised Land and his perception of the reason for it: not so much his own sin, but the faithless, grumbling people who led him to become angry and say what he said at the rock.

1.38 Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Imbue him with strength, for he shall allot it to Israel.

1.39 Moreover, your little ones who you said would be carried off,

This is another example of Moses expressing (pent-up) displeasure with the Israelites. They had complained to him, “Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!” (Numbers 14:3). But, lo and behold, Moses

now tells them, “your little ones who you said would be carried off” not only were not carried off; they would enter the Promised Land.

your children who do not yet know good from bad, they shall enter it; to them will I give it and they shall possess it.

Young children cannot be held accountable for wrongdoing since they do not yet know right from wrong. In post-biblical Judaism, Jews developed the concept of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which asserts that only when boys reach the age of thirteen, and girls the age of twelve, are they to be regarded as adults (i.e., people who are held accountable for their moral behavior).

1.40 As for you, turn about and march into the wilderness by the way of the Sea of Reeds.

1.41 You replied to me, saying, “We stand guilty before the Lord. We will go up now and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us.” And you all girded yourselves with war gear and recklessly started for the hill country.

1.42 But the Lord said to me, “Warn them: Do not go up and do not fight, since I am not in your midst; else you will be routed by your enemies.”

1.43 I spoke to you, but you would not listen; you flouted the Lord’s command and willfully marched into the hill country.

1.44 Then the Amorites who lived in those hills came out against you like so many bees and chased you, and they crushed you at Hormah in Seir.

WHEN GOD DOES NOT LISTEN

1.45 Again you wept before the Lord; but the Lord would not heed your cry or give ear to you.

The Hebrew translated here as “give ear to you” (*shama*) is the same Hebrew word (with different vowels) translated as “listen” in verse 43. This led biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman to write:

“Moses reminds the people that ‘*You* didn’t listen,’ and so later, ‘*He* didn’t listen.’ This foreshadows developments coming in the Tanakh [the Hebrew Bible] in which God will be described as hiding His face, not seeing and not listening—always in response to the people’s not listening to God. It will be stated explicitly among God’s last words to Moses at the end of the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:16–18).”

We, of course, do not know why God ever “hides His face” (Deuteronomy 31:17), why He seems not to see, or doesn’t listen. Too often, in contrast to the biblical cause-and-effect here and elsewhere (Israel doesn’t listen to God, so God later forsakes Israel), there appears to be no sin-based correlation to God’s silence.

From a Jewish perspective, this relates most specifically to God’s apparent hiding of His face during the Holocaust, when six million Jews were erased from the face of the earth. But other groups and individuals who have suffered horrific injustice can ask the same question: “Why does God hide His face?” And, for that matter, all people who have dear ones who suffered terrible fates can, and often do, ask the same question.

We mortals cannot know the answer. But the problem is not new, and it has long been acknowledged. As an anonymous medieval Jewish philosopher expressed it, “If I knew God, I’d be God.”

1.46 Thus, after you had remained at Kadesh all that long time,

Strangely enough, the chapter ends at this point, mid-sentence, and is completed with the opening sentence of Chapter 2. It is worth noting that the division of the Torah into chapters is not original to the biblical text. It was introduced in the twelfth century, roughly two millennia after Deuteronomy was already known to have existed.

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