

the heart of the matter | Deuteronomy 30:1-6

Phil Campbell argues that the whole biblical narrative is summarised in a few short verses of Deuteronomy. A bold claim? Check it out for yourself...

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recognising and describing the overarching biblical plot-line is an endeavour fundamental to effective bible reading. An understanding of the "meta-narrative," the "big picture" of the unfolding biblical story, is perhaps the most powerful tool in interpreting individual texts.

It has often been suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 provides a useful summary of the narrative plot-line that's about to unfold. This brief paper suggests that Deuteronomy 30:1-6 has a similar function; this short passage contains the seeds of the story which is about to unfold, and may provide a useful interpretative key for the ministry of Jesus.

2.0 THE TEXT - DEUTERONOMY 30:1-6

30:1 When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. 4 Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. 5 He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 6 The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

The claim of this paper would be better served by including the closing verses of Dt 29, where Moses foreshadows the consequences of abandoning God's covenant. The scenario is painted as a retrospective on fallen Israel... people will survey the ruins, and ask "Why has the LORD done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger?" (Dt 29:24). And the answer will be: "It is because this people

abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. 26 They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them.

But even then, the fearsome destruction of Israel will not be the end of the story. In short, the plotline summary derived from Deuteronomy 29-30 reads like this:-

- a) God will give Israel the promised land
- b) When Israel is unfaithful to the covenant, destruction will come
- c) When Israel takes to heart God's warnings in Exile, and obey him with "heart and soul", their fortunes will be restored, and they will be regathered from where they've been scattered
- d) They will retake possession of the land
- e) God will then circumcise their hearts, so that they MAY love him with all their heart and soul, and live.

It is not necessary to describe in detail the unfolding narrative of points a) and b) - though stated briefly, this is indeed the narrative plot-line of Exodus through to 2 Kings. The land is given, Israel rebels, and the land is taken away - exactly as foreshadowed in Deuteronomy 29:24-30:1.

2.1 A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT?

But what of the promised restoration? And the seeming circularity of the preconditions for a return to blessing?

v2 ... when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul...

v6 ... the LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live

It seems that to enjoy the benefit of

circumcised hearts that are able to love God "heart and soul", an Israel must return from exile in full repentance and obedience to God. Where can an Israel like this be found? This, in summary, is the post-exilic quest that forms the background to the ministry of Jesus. Ultimately, this Israel has only one member—but that's enough to bring about the outpouring of God's Spirit.

3.0 NEHEMIAH AND THE QUEST FOR HEART-AND-SOUL OBEDIENCE TO GOD

As the final book in the OT historical narrative, Nehemiah deserves special attention. Significantly, Nehemiah's opening prayer reflects on the promise of Deuteronomy 30:1-6.

5 Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

The question becomes, then, will this newly returned Israel-remnant meet the requirements of Deuteronomy 30:1-6? Though often unrecognised, this issue is at the structural heart of the Nehemiah narrative. The rebuilding of the wall is secondary to the question of the rebuilding of Israel's heart.

The best measure of progress comes in the three-part pledges of Israel in Nehemiah 10.

Neh 10:30 "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons. 31 When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts. 37 Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work.

3.1 A THREE-FOLD FAILURE

In spite of the promises, in spite of the neo-Davidic re-consecration of the walls, the end of the OT narrative is an unhappy one. The remnant of Israel has returned, but they cannot meet the requirements of Deuteronomy 30:1-6. By the time Nehemiah returns from his holiday in Babylon, all three of Israel's obedience-pledges have been broken. The narrative links between Nehemiah 10 and 13 are clear.

Neh 13:10 I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. 11 So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

Neh 13:16 Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. 17 I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing--desecrating the Sabbath day? 18 Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath."

Neh 13:23 Moreover, in those days I saw men

of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 24 Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. 25 I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women.

Clearly, this is not an Israel who will qualify to have circumcised hearts! Instead, they insist on repeating the sins of their forefathers. And at that point, the Old Testament narrative concludes.

4.0 CIRCUMCISED HEARTS AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

NT Wright makes much of the fact that the ministry of Jesus has strong links to the idea of "return from exile." Wright argues that in Jewish thought, the Old Testament exile continued; the quest for the Kingdom was the quest for freedom from external domination.

Wright is in many ways persuasive. And it may be that in my limited reading of his work, he has already more cogently highlighted the point I'm putting forward here. In short, what's lacking in the Old Testament story is not so much a return from exile, but a return of God's blessing after exile. What's lacking in the Old Testament story is an Israel that truly repents. And that's the Israel Jesus has come to call. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)

Similarly, it seems that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is calling for the heart-and-soul repentance of Israel. As noted earlier, there's an awkward circularity about Deuteronomy 30:2-6. To qualify for heart-circumcision, to attain a heart that can "love God heart-and-soul", there must first be an Israel that seeks that! Jesus says, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

The Sermon on the Mount is usually taken to be a "guide to Kingdom ethics", or to spell out a "standard that is too high to attain," thus impressing on his hearers the need for God's grace. But Jesus is simply calling together an Israel who wants to "seek righteousness" and thus be circumcised-in-heart. This Israel takes concrete form in the disciples who gather around him. Perhaps this is the logic behind the somewhat perplexing comment in John 1:47... *When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."*

The coming of the Spirit is certainly on view in the thinking of John the Baptist just a few verses earlier...

32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

And what of the question Jesus is asked in Matthew 22:36... "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with **all your heart and with all your soul** and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

It's the most important commandment, because it's exactly what's been lacking. Its exactly what Deuteronomy 30:1-6 has specified as the precondition for God's post-exilic re-blessing of Israel. And until now, it hasn't come.

4.1 HEART CIRCUMCISION AND THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

The concept of "circumcised hearts" introduced in Deuteronomy 30 seems fundamental to the thinking of Ezekiel, and is linked with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the means by which hard hearts will be replaced.

Ezek 11:17 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.' 18 "They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. 19 I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. 20 Then they will

follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. (cf Ezek 36:26-27)

Fundamental to the mission of Jesus then, is the gathering of an Israel hungry for righteousness, keen to obey God heart-and-soul, who will then have their hearts circumcised by the Holy Spirit. Note the words of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 11 - well before the Spirit has been given. **He calls them to PRAY TOWARDS THE GOAL OF HIS MISSION...**

*Luke 11:9 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven **give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**"*

5.0 TO CUT A LONG STORY SHORT...

Deuteronomy 30:1-6 sets out the prerequisite for the circumcision of hearts. First, a truly repentant Israel must return from their exile, ready to obey God with all their heart and all their soul. But where can an Israel like this be found?

In the midst of the hardened hearts of Israel, Jesus even despairs of his disciples. By Mark 8:17, with his disciples in the boat, Jesus says this: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? **Are your hearts hardened?** 18 Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?"

Ultimately, as the gospel narratives unfold, the obedient Israel returning to Jerusalem is an Israel with only one member - Jesus himself. And yet in his heart-and-soul obedience, the requirements of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 are fulfilled. It is only because of this that the Spirit can be poured out on the members of the new Israel...

*Rom 2:29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is **circumcision of the heart**, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.*

5.1 CONCLUSION

The few short verses of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 contain the seed of the whole of the unfolding biblical narrative - including the mission of Jesus. In these verses are foreshadowed the attaining and losing of the promised land, the scattering of the exile, and the requirement for "pure-hearted return" that is ultimately met only in Jesus Christ.

What's lacking in the Old Testament story is not so much a return from exile, but a return of God's blessing after exile. What's lacking in the Old Testament story is an Israel that truly repents. And that's the Israel Jesus has come to call.

More attention should perhaps be paid to the way these seminal verses have shaped and directed the ministry of Jesus, the gospel narratives, and our systematic theology.