



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

God's Word is a living Word

In Deuteronomy, as Moses continues his farewell discourse just outside the promised land, he reminds the Israelites of the momentous events on Mt Sinai when the Lord gave the Torah (the 'teaching', the 'law') and established a covenant with his people.

"Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Hear O Israel, the laws and rules that I proclaim to you this day!" (Deuteronomy 5:1)

What follows this verse is a repetition of the Decalogue ('Ten Commandments') given at Mt Sinai. Read this, along with Moses' added comments, in Chapter 5. As you do, place yourself in the biblical story: you are one of the new generation of Israelites preparing to enter the promised land. Your parents are dead, and Moses will soon die. At Sinai your parents had fled Egypt: the danger lay behind. Here, on the plains of Moab, an unknown future awaits you: the danger lies ahead. In what way does Moses' recitation of the Sinai teaching impact upon your heart and soul?

"It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today" (5:3).

Were you puzzled by the statement: 'not with our fathers'?

Yet we know from the book of Exodus that the covenant was made with 'our fathers'! Perhaps you understood this statement as underlining the timelessness of the covenant. As the sages taught, and Jewish tradition continues to teach, the Torah was not given to only one generation of Israelites in one place; it was given to every Jew in every time and place. "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day" (6:6).

Noting the word 'this day' ('today') in the verse above, the medieval Torah scholar Rashi comments on the present-day urgency of God's commandments: "They should not be in your eyes like an old edict to which a person does not attach importance, but rather, like a new one, towards which everybody runs." God's word is a living word, eternally fresh, relevant. It addresses the hearer in the 'now', calling for a response. The sages teach that this 'now' extends not only to obedience to the law but to the experiences of Sinai which can still be felt today. The biblical event has lost none of its flavor, its power to reveal God's glory and move us. In the Midrash it is said that at Sinai:

"God's voice, as it was uttered, split up into seventy voices, in seventy languages, so that all the nations should understand" (Exod. R. 5:9).

Originating as God's gift to Israel, the Torah goes forth to the nations. Says the prophet Isaiah:

"For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (2:3).

Reflection

- Ponder the vitality of Torah as understood by the Jewish sages, and as heard and felt in your own life as a 21st century Christian.
- Discuss practical ways to live this vitality in daily life, and to avoid staleness and complacency.

Further reflection

A poignant scene is described in Deut. 3:23-28 where Moses begs the Lord to allow him to enter the promised land. Read these verses pondering:

- How uncharacteristic it is of Moses to pray for himself rather than others.
- The urgency of Moses. His death is near and he pleads with the Lord one last time.
- The pathos of the scene; Moses' humanity, vulnerability.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/ NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Rashi: *Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: NJPS.