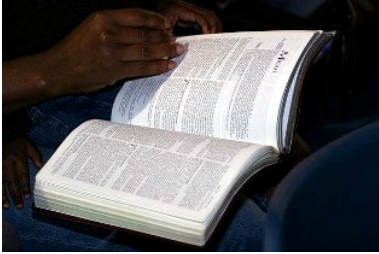


DEUTERONOMY



The first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch, have traversed a vast amount of territory before they arrive at the climax of their presentation – the Book of Deuteronomy. Here Moses stands with the Israelites at the borders of the Promised Land. Israel can look back to a glorious past, as God rescued them from Egyptian slavery and brought them through the wilderness. They now look forward to a glorious future in the land – a gift of God’s grace. So Moses preaches his final sermon, in which he looks back to the covenant they entered into

with the Lord at Sinai, and also looks forward to life in the land where they will live out the principles of that covenant. Scanning the past and the future he sums up the essence of living life in the presence of God. His final inspiring sermon makes up the book we call Deuteronomy. And the principles he expounded that day still have the ring of truth all these centuries later.

The central principle for life lived in God’s presence, and the main focus of Moses’ sermon, is ‘love’. ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deut 6:5, NRSV). Moses could have chosen many terms to describe the relationship with God, so why does he keep repeating ‘love’? Only Psalms and Proverbs use it more often, and Moses refers to it more than John does in his gospel. His reason for doing so is probably that it is the common verb used in ancient treaties and covenants to describe the relationship between an overlord and his servants. So when a vassal ‘loves’ the Egyptian pharaoh, for example, he serves him and dedicates himself to no one else. Seen in this light then ‘love’ is a duty. This type of love can be commanded – as it is in the verse quoted from Deuteronomy above. Love is no sentimental abstraction, but a matter of commitment and faithfulness.

Israel’s covenant relationship with God involves a triangle of relationships involving love. First, God’s relationship with Israel: ‘It was because the LORD *loved* you ... that the LORD ... redeemed you’ (7:8). Secondly, Israel’s response to God: ‘You [Israel] shall *love* the LORD your God ...’ (6:5). Thirdly, the relationships which exist between individual Israelites who are in covenant relationship with God. Surprisingly, however, ‘love’ is not used to describe this. Rather than loving a fellow Israelite one demonstrates ‘justice’: ‘Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue’ (Deut 16:20). (There is one apparent exception to this in 10:19, but this relates to loving an alien, not a fellow Israelite.)

In Deuteronomy why should ‘love’ describe God’s relationship to Israel and also Israel’s relationship to God, but never the relationship between fellow Israelites? The answer is that love must be demonstrated in concrete terms; a passion for justice demonstrates that we truly love others. It is practical, down to earth, active love.

In his final sermon, therefore, Moses turned to matters of ultimate importance for the people of God. God demonstrated his love for Israel through an act which brought justice for them – freedom from slavery. In return, Israel shows its love for God not simply in bowing before him but by ensuring that justice is woven into the fabric of Israelite society.

If as Seventh-day Adventists we wish to be faithful to the Lord our God we might well be challenged as we listen to Moses’ final sermon. True religious faith which is based on a love for God, must express itself in a passion for justice. Not just theoretically, but practically. Tackling injustice within the Seventh-day Adventist church is not a distraction from our mission, but a practical expression of our love for God. On numerous occasions throughout Moses’ sermon we read, ‘All the people shall say, “Amen”’. Can we echo that, not simply with our words, but also with our actions?

[Laurence Turner. Professor of Old Testament, Newbold College]