
Biblical Poetry

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In chapter 32 of Deuteronomy the author places on the lips of Moses ‘the Song of Moses,’ a recollection by God of the troubled relationship between God and Israel. It begins by remembering an idyllic time when Israel was ‘the pupil of God’s eye,’ but by verse 15 the sins of Israel are laid bare and God’s fury is unleashed. From verse 26, God reconsiders punishment as a solution and resolves to deliver Israel from its enemies. Through 52 tumultuous verses, a story of the redemption of a people is told.

As an example of biblical poetry, this chapter is rich indeed. Let’s focus on the opening 15 verses. Read aloud Deut.32:1-15. Listen to the rhythm, patterns, repetitions and imagery of the sacred text. What do you notice?

Did you enjoy the poetic parallelism? That’s where two or more lines mirror each other as in:

*“May my teaching drop like the rain,
my speech condense like the dew;
like gentle rain on grass,
like showers on new growth” (32:2).*

In other cases, the lines sound similar but contain two distinct ideas/items such as those highlighted here:

*“Give ear, O **heavens**, and I will speak;
Let the **earth** hear the words of my mouth.”
(32:1).*

*“The Rock, **his work** is perfect,
and all **his ways** are just” (32:4).*

Several metaphors are employed to describe God. (Rock, Warrior, Father, Mother, Eagle)

Note, too, that four times in v.2 Moses’ words are likened to water. Just as lifegiving water sustains the earth, so these words are recited in order to sustain the covenant between God and the Israelites as they enter the promised land.

Reflection on *teshuvah*

At time of writing this issue of Light of Torah the liturgical context for this Torah portion is the Ten Days of Repentance, as the Jewish calendar moves from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur. The Sabbath which falls between Rosh HaShanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (‘Day of Atonement’) is called Shabbat Shuvah. In Hebrew, *shuvah* means ‘return,’ suggesting the return to one’s pure origins. From here comes the Hebrew word for ‘repentance:’ *teshuvah*.

At times the journey ‘home’ to God seems so far that we hesitate to even start. Yet we are not the only one covering the distance: God sets out to meet us! A poignant story comes down to us through Jewish tradition:

“A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of hundred days. His friends said to him, ‘Return to your father’; he said: ‘I cannot.’ Then his father sent word to say, ‘Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.’ So God says, ‘Return to me, and I will return to you’ (Mal.3:7)” [Pesikta Raba].

This is a beautiful story for Christians to recall when pondering the Gospel image of the father running to meet the prodigal son (Luke 15).

Think of a broken relationship in your life. Does it seem impossible to mend? Impossible to forgive, to be forgiven, to heal again? This week, take one healing step, even if it is simply to pray for the desire to repent or to forgive. Perhaps talk over the matter with a trusted friend. ‘Return’ as far as you can.

Further reflection

Is your relationship with God, with God’s people, ‘tumultuous’? In what way does this week’s Torah reading speak to you?

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *A Woman’s Torah Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York: Lambda, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.

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