

Deuteronomy 5:1-5  
Dr. Steven R. Cook

Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “Hear [שמע *shama* – *to hear, with the idea of obeying*], O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances [i.e., *written laws and case laws*] which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully [i.e., *learn God’s Word in order to walk in His will*].<sup>2</sup> “The LORD our God [יהוה אלהינו – *Yahweh Eloheinu*] made a covenant [ברית *berith* – *covenant, contract arrangement; here a bilateral covenant between a suzerain and vassal which had stipulations*] with us at Horeb [to the exodus generation].<sup>3</sup> “The LORD did not make this [bilateral] covenant with our fathers [i.e., *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to whom God gave a unilateral covenant without stipulations; see Gen 17:7-8; 26:24; 28:13-14*], but with us [the exodus generation and their descendants], *with* all those of us alive here today.<sup>4</sup> “The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire [God provided revelation about Himself and what He expected of His people],<sup>5</sup> *while* I was standing between the LORD and you at that time [as mediator], to declare to you the word of the LORD [what Moses revealed was God’s Word, not his own]; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.

**Summary:**

The main point of this pericope is that Moses called the second generation of Israelites to hear the statutes and ordinances that were part of the bilateral covenant agreement between them and Yahweh, their God. The Israelites were camped east of the Jordan River and poised to enter the land of Canaan. Moses “summoned all Israel and said to them: ‘Hear O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully’” (Deut 5:1). The word “hear” translates the Hebrew verb שמע *shama*, which means to listen to instructions for the purpose of following them. Specifically, Israel was to learn “the statutes and the ordinances” that they might “observe them carefully.” Moses specifies the covenant, saying, “The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb” (Deut 5:2). This reveals both parties involved, and follows the pattern of a bilateral covenant between a suzerain and vassal; between a superior and an inferior. Moses went on to say, “The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *with* all those of us alive here today” (Deut 5:3). The “covenant” referred to here is the bilateral Mosaic covenant, in which stipulations had to be met for blessing to occur. The Mosaic covenant is different than the unilateral covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which covenant had no stipulations (Gen 17:7-8; 26:24; 28:13-14). Thomas Constable states, “The covenant to which Moses referred (v. 2) is not the Abrahamic but the

Mosaic Covenant. What follows is an upgrade of the Mosaic Covenant for the new generation about to enter the Promised Land.”<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill adds:

Not only is the covenant referred to here the same as that at Horeb, but it is only that and not anything anterior to it. “It was not with our fathers,” Moses said, “that the LORD made this covenant, but with us” (v. 3). This rules out the identification of the Deuteronomic covenant with the patriarchal and, in fact, draws a clear line of demarcation between the two. This is in line with the generally recognized theological fact that the Horeb-Deuteronomy covenant is by both form and function different from the so-called Abrahamic. The latter [Abrahamic covenant] is in the nature of an irrevocable and unconditional grant made by the Lord to the patriarchs, one containing promises of land, seed, and blessing. The former [Mosaic covenant] is a suzerain-vassal arrangement between the Lord and Israel designed to regulate Israel’s life as the promised nation within the framework of the Abrahamic covenant. The existence of Israel is unconditional, but its enjoyment of the blessing of God and its successful accomplishment of the purposes of God are dependent on its faithful obedience to the covenant made at Horeb. Thus the covenant in view here is not the same as that made with the fathers (i.e., the patriarchal ancestors), but it finds its roots there and is related to it in a subsidiary way.<sup>2</sup>

And, this covenant, once made, was binding upon all subsequent generations, either to bless or curse.<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe writes:

When God made this covenant, it included every generation of the nation of Israel from that day on and not just with the generation that gathered at Sinai. Moses was addressing a new generation and yet he said, “The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb” (v. 2). Just as God’s covenant with Abraham included the Jewish people of future generations, so did His covenant at Sinai.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Dt 5:1.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 142.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this can be found in 2 Kings 17:1-18, where God judged the ten northern tribes for violating the terms of the covenant made with the exodus generation. The result was their being destroyed by the Assyrians and sent into captivity.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 35.

Moses, speaking to the second generation of Israelites since the exodus, addressed them as if they were standing directly before God, saying “The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire” (Deut 5:4). Some of Moses’ audience would have been at the mountain, but would have been younger and may not have understood what was happening. The phrase “face to face” is a figure of speech that means directly, one person to another. Biblically, God has revealed Himself generally through all creation (Psa 19:1-2; Rom 1:18-20), but this was special revelation provided directly by God to His people. God speaks, and He does so in language people can understand (e.g., Jer 4:28; 30:2; Ezek 5:13-17). This is what sets Him apart from stupid idols who do not speak (cf. Psa 135:16). This revelation was also personal, to Israel, which marked them as His special people. Moses also mentioned his role in the covenant arrangement, as the mediator between God and Israel, saying, “I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain” (Deut 5:5). Remember, God spoke the Ten Commandments directly to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex 20:1-17). However, the experience frightened them, for “All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance” (Ex 20:18). Such fear is common among those who encounter God (see Gen 32:30; Ex 33:20; Judg 6:22-23; 13:22; Isa 6:5; Dan 8:17-18; Luke 5:8; Rev 1:17). Rather than listen to the voice of God directly, the people said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die” (Ex 20:19). Afterward, God spoke mediately through Moses, who faithfully communicated “the word of the LORD.”

A theological extrapolation of Israel’s personal relationship with God—based on understandable language and expectations—would have provided them a personal sense of destiny, for the God who chose and spoke to them, who entered into a special contract relationship with them, was able also to direct their future and secure their blessings if they would obey Him. As Christians, we too have a special relationship with God as participants of the New Covenant (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 9:15), which was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ by means of His sinless life (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 John 3:5) and shed blood on the cross (1 Cor 10:16; Eph 2:13; Heb 12:24; 1 Pet 1:19). Additionally, we have special revelation in the Bible, which is God’s written word for us and to us, which tells us all we need to know to be saved (1 Cor 15:3-4), and to live a life of faith and godliness. Our relationship with God through Christ means we are children of God, brothers and sisters to the King of kings and Lord of lords, and we too enjoy a personal sense of destiny, knowing God is directing our lives toward the eternal state, toward which He is moving us.