

CONNECTING WITH OUR COLLECTIVE STORY

A Devotional Meditation on D'varim (Words)

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22; Isaiah 1:1-27; Job 12:23;
Acts 7:1-60, 17:26-28; 1 Corinthians 15:32

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Here's something from Moses that I have always appreciated because of the unusual names he mentions:

And the LORD said to me, "Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession." (The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. Like the Anakim they are also counted as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim. The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the LORD gave to them.)



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Deuteronomy 2:9-12 ESV

Moses goes on to say:

Today you are to cross the border of Moab at Ar. And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession. (It is also counted as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly lived there—but the Ammonites call them Zamzummim—a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim; but the LORD destroyed them before the Ammonites, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place, as he did for the people of Esau, who live in Seir, when he destroyed the Horites before them and they dispossessed them and settled in their place even to this day. As for the Avvim, who lived in villages as far as Gaza, the Caphtorim, who came from Caphtor, destroyed them and settled in their place.)

Deuteronomy 2:18-23 ESV

Once we get past the odd names, we realize that Moses has summarized the history of the Middle East up to the point when the people of Israel are about to take possession of Canaan. Most of his opening remarks in Deuteronomy tell the history of Israel, starting with God's Covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminds the second generation of Hebrews who came out of Egypt what their parents should have told them: that they are the people of God, chosen to carry his Covenant of redemption to the whole world, starting with the base of operations God will establish through them in the Promised Land of Israel.

The transmission of collective memory is more important than we may think. Without it, our tendency is to default to a visionless—and hopeless—outlook of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” If there is no point in our existence, and no hope of anything better for the future, we might as well make the best of things right now. Or, as some might say, “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

That’s a sad commentary on what throughout history has been the default setting of God’s highest creation on earth. Even the Covenant people of Israel tended to think about themselves that way, which is why Moses, the Prophets, and the Apostles frequently reminded them about their identity, heritage, and future. That’s exactly what Stephen was doing when he made his defense before the Sanhedrin. Judea’s leaders in his day hadn’t forgotten their special place in God’s plans, but they needed help connecting the great events of Israel’s past with the greater events happening right in front of their eyes.

We still need such reminders. All nations do. Eventually we’ll all come under the global Commonwealth of Israel when Messiah reigns from Zion, but until then the most consistent record we have of God’s involvement in human affairs is our history. It’s clearest in the history of Israel and the Jewish people down to our time. When we study that history, and when we teach it to our children and churches and communities, we are telling them that there really is a God who made us and who is redeeming us just as he promised.

That, by the way, is why Moses mentioned the history of the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and even those peculiar Zamzummim. God had plans for each of those nations, just as he has plans for all nations. Job tells us that:

He makes nations great, and he destroys them;
he enlarges nations, and leads them away.

Job 12:23 ESV

Paul expanded on that thought in his dialogue with the men of Athens:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;
as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

Acts 17:26-28 ESV

Our responsibility is to teach our children our own national stories, both good and bad. Spanish children must learn about the Inquisition and expulsion of the Jews, but they also must learn of the heroic struggle of 800 years that freed their nation from Muslim occupation. American children have to understand the stain of institutionalized slavery, but they must also understand the godly principles built into our national fabric that compelled us to correct that and other injustices. Children in Ghana can’t ignore the struggles of post-colonial independence, but they gain dignity and hope in learning about the powerful kingdoms like the Asante Empire that preceded the colonial era.

Every nation and people have stories like this, and every child must learn those stories. It's how we connect with our fathers and mothers extending back to the beginning, and how we connect with the Author and Finisher of our collective story.