

## “ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE”: THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT OF THE LAW

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 22:34–40, a lawyer approaches Jesus to ask which is the greatest commandment of the law (cf. Mark 12:28–34). While the initial proposition seems innocent, the context reveals that it likely stems from a desire to entrap Jesus in his own words. It may also stem from a rabbinical tradition that gave certain commands more weight than others,<sup>2</sup> namely the moral commands of the law.<sup>3</sup> Jesus responds by citing two Old Testament (OT) texts, first the *Shema* in Deut 6:5, “You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus deems this command “the great first commandment.” He follows up by mentioning a second command that is “like it,” from Lev 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Watts notes that the scribe’s question reflects a long tradition in Judaism that sought to encapsulate the Torah, found in key parts of Deuteronomy (6:4–5; 10:12–22; 30:1–10) and the prophets (e.g. Mic 6:8; also Isa 66:2; Jer 22:3; Zech 8:16–17; Pss 15; 24), and later rabbinical instruction (*Mek. Exod.* 15:26; *b. Ber.* 63a; *b. Sabb.* 31a; *b. Mak.* 23b; *Tanh Deut.* 5:10). Watts, “Mark” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 216.

<sup>3</sup> “As elsewhere, it is interesting to observe that Jesus does not formally distinguish the moral from the civil or ceremonial law.” Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> In a parallel passage in Luke 10, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus responds with a question about the lawyer’s hermeneutics: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26) The clear implication is that Jesus regards the teaching of the law as providing a sufficient answer to such a question. Unlike Matt 22 and Mark 12, here it is the lawyer, not Jesus, who responds by combining the double-love command in Deut 6:5 with Lev 19:18. While likely different stories altogether, Hays rightly observes that “Luke’s telling of the story has the effect of emphasizing that Jesus brings no new revelation; rather, Jesus simply reinforces what Israel’s teachers of the law already knew well.” In other words, in the tradition of the prophets, Jesus is simply summoning the religious leaders of the people to obey the law already given to them. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 209.

The emphasis on love for both God and neighbor would not have been lost on the lawyer as the chief moral aspect of the law. Exhortations for humans to love God with their whole being are found throughout Deuteronomy, although less frequent in the rest of the Old Testament (Deut 6:5; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:3; 30:6, 16; Josh 22:5; 23:11; Ps 31:23). Descriptions of human love for God is relatively rare outside of the Psalms (1 Kgs 3:3; Pss 5:11; 18:1; 91:14; 116:1; Isa 56:6).

But what are we to make of Jesus' unique conclusion in Matt 22:40, found neither in Mark nor Luke? "On these two commandments *depend* all the Law and the Prophets" (emphasis added). Surely the Law and Prophets cannot be reduced to Beatles-esque simplicity—"all you need is love/love is all you need"—brilliant as that song may be. Nor can the phrase be explained by a word study of κρέματα, which is not necessarily a technical term. It simply means "to hang" or "suspend from."

The uniqueness is perhaps found in how expansive Jesus's conclusion is. It is not just that particular laws and prophecies can be explained in terms of the double-love command, but that "*all* the Law and the Prophets" are "suspended" from these two pillars.<sup>5</sup> In other words, all the other commandments in the law *hang on them* like a door on its hinges. As such, Jesus does nothing less than propose a particular hermeneutical lens through which one might understand the Old Testament, one in which the injunction of love for God and neighbor becomes the guiding principle. According to Hays, these two commandments "are not merely the greatest or most important, the ones at the top of the list; rather, they have a systemic, structural, and hermeneutical role."<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I want to explore how the OT might lead to Jesus's conclusion. Is it really a novel idea, or is the emphasis on love as the greatest commandment found in the OT? Is it explicit or implied? I intend to show in three texts that from the incipient stage of Israelite history the law demands a heart relationship with God above all other demands, which is characterized by acts of love and loyal devotion to God as a response to his loving kindness toward his people. Jesus's emphasis on love as the greatest commandment, therefore, is simply in keeping with this tradition.

Quite obviously, Deut 6:4–9 is central to this discussion, and by extension Lev 19:18. But in the interest of brevity I will focus here on what Jesus emphasized as the greatest of all commandments.<sup>7</sup> The three orations in

<sup>5</sup> The reference to the "Law" here is likely broad, encompassing the entire Pentateuch. Likewise, his reference to the "Prophets" (cf. Luke 24:44, "Prophets and Psalms") may be expansive, encompassing both the Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Jeremiah–The Twelve). The phrase *ὁ νόμος...καὶ οἱ προφῆται* thus refers to the whole Hebrew Bible, just as in 2 Kgs 17:13; Neh 9:26; Zech 7:12; Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom 3:21. Also see BDAG, 678 for instances where *νόμος* alone likely refers to the Hebrew Bible in its entirety: Matt 5:18; Luke 10:26; 16:17; John 7:49; 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; Rom 3:19; 1 Cor 14:21.

<sup>6</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Ideally, the second command should receive equal weight to the first, thus I would envision a second article tracing the injunction to love one's neighbor in biblical theology. Key

Deuteronomy are the natural starting place since the bases, motivations, and priorities of the law are evident in its very structure.<sup>8</sup>

## II. THE MOSAIC PRIORITIES OF THE LAW

What Jesus taught in Matt 22 as the greatest of commandments accords with statements elsewhere establishing the priority of some laws over others. In Matt 9:13, for example, Jesus exhorts his audience to “go and learn” what Hos 6:6 actually means: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”<sup>9</sup> Luke 11:42 describes it as “justice and the love of God.” While these statements are not intended to displace Israel’s formal, external religion, they nonetheless stress a certain weight ascribed to some commands over others. In Old Testament contexts such as Deuteronomy, the core instruction for holy living requires more than just another duty.

There are three programmatic texts that strongly urge love for God as a response to his gracious election and salvation, which is preceded by repentance (circumcision of the heart) and obedience: Deut 6:4–9, 10:12–11:1, and 30:1–10. These three texts help establish the comparative priority of “love” within the law.<sup>10</sup>

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to that discussion is the Lukan citation (10:25–28), where the emphasis seems to be more on the second command than the first. The definition of one’s “neighbor” is illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which immediately follows (10:29–37). “The appearance of the Samaritan instead of a lay Judean is therefore striking, and this directly challenges the Jewish interpretation of the ‘neighbor’ of Lev. 19:18.” See Pao and Schnabel, “Luke” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 321–22.

<sup>8</sup> The designation “law” can be used to describe the entire Pentateuch per footnote 4 above, but when *Torah* (תורה [tōwrâ]) is used in an objective sense it often refers to the book of Deuteronomy specifically, such as in the prologue in Deut 1:5, “Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this *law* (i.e. תורה [tōwrâ]).” While Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 84–85, maintains that the Pentateuch was not referred to as Torah until the second century B.C., Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church: And its Background in Early Judaism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1985), 63–104, argues that the biblical writers began referring to it this way much earlier (e.g. Deut 17:18; 28:61; 29:20[21]; 30:10; 31:9, 24; Josh 1:7, 8; 8:31ff; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6; 22:8; 23:25; 2 Chr 23:18; 30:16; Ezr 3:2; 7:6; Neh 8:1–2).

<sup>9</sup> In Hos 6:6, “mercy” is the translation of חֶסֶד (ḥesed), or steadfast/loyal love.

<sup>10</sup> The prophets follow suit in preaching the core requirement of heart devotion rather than ritual observance, although these texts largely echo the substance of Moses’s orations in Deuteronomy. E.g. 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:11–17; 43:22–24; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:6–8; cf. Prov 15:8; 21:27; 28:9. Fesko writes, “All OT revelation subsequent to the Pentateuch is built on themes and concepts found within the first five books of the Bible. This means, then, that one finds a hermeneutical relationship between the Pentateuch and the rest of the OT, one that is exhibited in the intra-canonical interpretation of the OT.” J.V. Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*, ed. by Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 443–77.

## A. DEUTERONOMY 6:4–9

When the Israelites see God's glory at Sinai and hear his voice,<sup>11</sup> the first statement of the law is not "Thou shalt not," but "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 20:1, 12). The same pattern is repeated numerous times in the holiness legislation in Leviticus: "Be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy," "I am Yahweh who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God," and "I am Yahweh."<sup>12</sup> It is a fundamental fact of the law that it stems from a proper relationship to the God who delivered the Israelites at the Red Sea, and provides the basis for both the statutes and obligations that follow.

The opening chapters of Deuteronomy emphasize this point as Moses narrates Israel's stubbornness in the wilderness, not exactly an unwillingness to *accept* the Sinai covenant, but rather a perverse attitude in their provocation of God. Their departure from Sinai and later rebellion in refusing to enter the land are recounted by Moses in excruciating detail (Deut 1), and the main admonition is that the Israelites had forgotten God's salvific acts in both Egypt and the wilderness on their behalf (1:30–33; 2–3). Thus, Moses seasons these events with an element of warning: the wilderness generation was stubborn in the past, so this new generation—on the brink of entering Canaan—must learn to submit and trust in God's gracious provisions (Deut 4), for indeed, it is God who saved them in the first place (4:20, 32–40).<sup>13</sup>

Up until Deuteronomy 6:4–5, "fear Yahweh"—which means something like deeply felt respect—has been the main exhortation, which leads to blessing (Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17; Deut 4:10; 6:2).<sup>14</sup> But a shift occurs in Deuteronomy 6:4 with the *Shema* (שְׁמָע [š<sup>e</sup>ma], "Hear!"), and the imperatives that follow in 6:5–9. In the OT, few texts are more pregnant with significance and meaning than the *Shema*, which is like the pledge of allegiance for the Israelites: "Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one!"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Deut 4:11–12 and 5:24–27 imply that it is the voice of God at Sinai, not the fire, that brought the fear of God on all the people, which led to the establishing of Moses's mediatorial role (cf. Exod 20:18–21).

<sup>12</sup> Lev 11:44; 18:2, 4, 6, 21, 30; 19:3, 10, 12, 13, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36; 20:7, 24; 21:12, 15, 23; 22:2, 8, 16, 30, 31, 22, 43; 24:22; 25:17, 38, 55; 26:1, 13, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 192. See also Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 126: "Throughout his addresses Moses refers to details not to be forgotten, reinforcing the impression created here that Israel's memory is not simply to involve abstract notions about God, but his specific acts in history on their behalf."

<sup>14</sup> יהוה (yhwh) + ירא (yārē') has a wide range of meaning, though it is most common to interpret it in a subjective, non-rational sense, meaning reverential awe and respect to God. Most exhortations to "fear Yahweh" fall along these lines (e.g. in Deut, see 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6; 10:12–13, 20; 13:4[5]; 14:23; 17:19; 28:58; 31:12–13). However, the construct phrase "the fear of Yahweh" always has an objective, rational sense and with varied foci (e.g. Ps 19:9; Prov 9:10).

<sup>15</sup> The *Shema* became foundational in Jewish communities for liturgy and prayer (see 1 Tim 2:1–7). Aside from Jesus's quotation in Matt 22 and Mark 12, the *Shema* is also the basis for understanding unity in God (1 Cor 8:4–6). In the OT, Joshua repeats the core imperatives of Deut 6:5–9 in Josh 22:5, but Josiah is the only person who imbibes it: "Before

However, Moses's concern here is not monotheism, strictly speaking, but that the Israelites declare their complete and unrivaled devotion to Yahweh.<sup>16</sup> This point is clear in what follows. Four traits, or attitudes, are necessary for faithful covenant living:

*Figure 1*

Deuteronomic Phrase	Text
<i>Love Yahweh with heart, soul, strength</i>	6:5 (4:29)
<i>Fear Yahweh</i>	6:13 (5:29)
<i>Serve Yahweh</i>	6:13
<i>Keep Yahweh's commands</i>	6:17
<i>Purpose: for your good</i>	6:24

Deuteronomy 6, we should remember, follows on the heels of the Ten Commandments in the previous chapter. It is, therefore, a theological exposition of that text.<sup>17</sup> And, as Moses writes, the primary expression of loyalty to the Ten Commandments, and by extension the God of Sinai, is "love," the central command.<sup>18</sup> "You shall love Yahweh your God" (Deut 6:5) is the first expression in the OT of commitment to Yahweh in such terms. Yahweh has promised steadfast love and faithfulness to those who love him and keep his commands (cf. Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10). But in light of Israel's difficulty in keeping the covenant (Deut 1:34–46; 9:1–10:11), and God's gracious and merciful

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him there was no king like him, who turned to Yahweh with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him" (2 Kgs 23:25).

<sup>16</sup> Since Deut 6:4 is a verbless clause, there is some debate on translation and therefore interpretation. Moberly's summary is helpful: "On...the argument that 6:4 is *either* about an exclusive relationship between YHWH and Israel (with other gods recognized) *or* about the nature of YHWH as 'one' (with other gods denied) is misleading and offers a false alternative. If YHWH is 'one' in the sense of 'the one and only,' then it means that He is such that the people of Israel must be exclusive in their faithfulness and allegiance to Him. This construal does not deny the possible reality, in some sense, of 'other gods'; indeed, such a denial would be odd in the context of Deuteronomy, given its repeated warnings against going after 'other gods.' Nonetheless, the point is that, whatever 'other gods' there may be, such 'other gods' should be of no existential interest to Israel, but rather are to be displaced, rejected, and disregarded, since Israel's focus is to be on YHWH alone." R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 20.

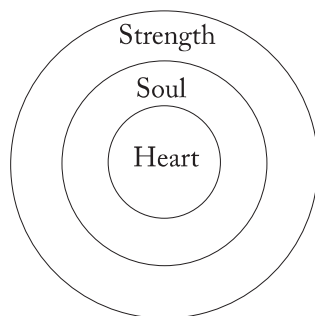
<sup>17</sup> "The substance of the verses that follow continues from the Decalogue address, having at its heart the primary command to be loyal to Yahweh alone. Its extension from this into obedience to all commands of Yahweh reflects the logic of the Decalogue discourse," J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 139.

<sup>18</sup> On Deut 6:5 as the language of covenant loyalty, see William L. Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1963): 77–87.

pardon (Deut 4:29–31), the covenantal people are now commanded to reciprocate Yahweh’s covenantal love.<sup>19</sup>

The commitment expressed in love is expanded with a triad of qualifiers demonstrating that one’s love for God requires full-bodied and complete devotion: “with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *strength*” (Deut 6:5). Block has shown that these dimensions of covenantal commitment proceed from the inside out.<sup>20</sup> The three Hebrew words can be represented visually in three concentric circles beginning with the inner being (the heart), and extending outwardly to the whole person (the soul), ending with all available resources (strength):<sup>21</sup>

*Figure 2*



We conclude from Deut 6:4–5 that true love for God arises from the heart and permeates all of life. Indeed, the following verse makes the whole teaching explicit: the commandments are to be “upon your heart.” Wholehearted love for God is a transforming force, as it were, rooted in the innermost place of one’s being—the heart: mind, emotions, and will (6:6). Further, love for God is expressed by faithfulness in every context of life, beginning with the family (6:7), and extending to the public spaces (6:8–9). In other words, “a genuine heart relationship was God’s own prerequisite to obeying his laws.”<sup>22</sup> The influence of the Shema in Israelite history confirms the centrality of heart devotion in Israelite religion—exemplified by love for Yahweh.

## B. DEUTERONOMY 10:12–11:1

If Deut 6:4–5 forms the initial basis of a right theological understanding of the law’s priority—love—then Deut 10:12–11:1 articulates the proper response for maintaining a relationship with God, especially against the probability of ongoing rebellion.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, “And you shall love Yahweh your God” in Deut 6:5 presupposes “those who love me” in Exod 20:6 and Deut 5:10.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 184.

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from Block, *Deuteronomy*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Kaiser, “The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law,” 182.

Deuteronomy 10:12–22 is often considered one unit,<sup>23</sup> but the question proposed in 10:12 is not fully resolved until 11:1, “*Therefore* you shall love Yahweh your God.” The opening “And now” in 10:12 indicates a transition from the historical reminiscence articulated in 9:1–10:11, where Moses recounts the stubbornness of Israel’s past as illustrated in their rebelliousness at Sinai/Horeb (9:7–21), and the renewal of the covenant as Yahweh’s answer to his prayer.

Moses then raises a question on the practical implications of the renewed covenant: “What does Yahweh your God require from you?”<sup>24</sup> As with Deut 6:4–9, five requirements are necessary: fear, walking in Yahweh’s ways, love, service, and keeping Yahweh’s law. These terms are already familiar in Deuteronomy as noted above:

Figure 3

Deuteronomic Phrase	Text
<i>Fear Yahweh</i>	10:12 (5:29; 6:13)
<i>Walk in Yahweh’s ways</i>	10:12 (5:33)
<i>Love Yahweh with heart and soul</i>	10:12 (4:29; 6:5)
<i>Serve Yahweh</i>	10:12 (6:13)
<i>Keep Yahweh’s commands</i>	10:13 (6:17)
<i>Purpose: for your good</i>	10:13 (6:24)

This table indicates that Moses is recalling previous commands to present a unified picture. Being identified with Yahweh means total commitment and trust. Indeed, it is “for your good” to be aligned with Yahweh in such a way (10:13), the one who “set his heart”<sup>25</sup> to love the Israelites and their offspring (10:15), “you above all peoples.” The covenantal people, therefore, must reciprocate Yahweh’s covenantal love, the central command. In light of Israel’s difficulty in keeping the covenant (9:1–10:11), they are reminded that covenantal obedience requires more than simply ethnic identity, formal correctness, or ceremonial exactness.

Chief among the exhortations that follow is 10:16: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart.”<sup>26</sup> This is a new phrase in the Pentateuch,

<sup>23</sup> The unit is bracketed by the temporal marker, עַתָּה (‘atâ, vv. 12, 22).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. similar language in Mic 6:8, “And what does Yahweh seek (require) from you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Though the exact terms of Yahweh’s requirements are different in Mic 6:8, there is still much in common, and the language is familiarly deuteronomic.

<sup>25</sup> Both here and in Deut 7:7 the verb, “to set his heart,” is connected to the election of Israel. Cf. Ray Carlton Jones, “Deuteronomy 10:12–22,” *Interpretation* 46, no. 3 (1992): 282.

<sup>26</sup> מוֹל (mwl) certainly has an imperatival nuance in Deut 10:16, though it stands as a wəqatal perfect 2mp, “You should circumcise” (וּמְלִתֶּם אֶת עֶרְלַת לְבַבְכֶּם) [ûmaltem ‘et ‘orlat l’ēbāḇkem]). Whereas Leviticus 26:41 has the noun construction, לְבַבְּהָ עֶרְלִי (l’ēbāḇom he‘ārēl), “an uncircumcised heart,” Deuteronomy 10:16 is the first instance of מוֹל (mwl) as

and essential here to establish the centrality of heart religion as the core principle of the law. Israel practiced circumcision as the full removal of the foreskin of the male sexual organ (Gen 17). Here a different “organ,” so to speak, is to be circumcised—the “heart” (לֵב [lēb]) which must mean something like “repent” coupled with the parallel clause in the second line, “and be no longer stubborn” (10:16b). Wolff states that the לֵב/לֵבֹב (lēb/lēbob) word group is “the most important . . . in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology.”<sup>27</sup> Only rarely do these two terms refer to the human organ that pumps blood, which is significant.<sup>28</sup> In the majority of texts, rational and intellectual functions are ascribed to the heart, that is, everything a modern person would attribute to the brain—power of perception, reason, understanding, insight, consciousness, memory, knowledge, reflection, judgment, sense of direction, and discernment. These terms together comprise the core meaning of לֵב (lēb) and לֵבֹב (lēbob).<sup>29</sup> The word group means least of all “emotions,” a common contemporary attribute of the heart, though this idea is assumed in some contexts. Rather, that which is associated with the human will is most prominent: its plan, decisions and intentions, the consciousness, and sincerely devoted obedience.<sup>30</sup> Thus, “the essential characteristic that, broadly speaking, dominates the concept is that the heart is called to reason, and especially to hear the word of God.”<sup>31</sup>

Among the demands of 10:12–22, the circumcision of the heart is noteworthy in that there is an attempt to give fresh significance to an old custom by means of spiritual reinterpretation.<sup>32</sup> Although the ritual must be carried out in the flesh, the core meaning of the rite is not merely external. Indeed, how might one know that an Israelite is circumcised? He must look not to the flesh but to the heart—his mind, emotions, and will.

By theologizing the rite of circumcision, Moses is likely stressing the inner reality of the covenant God made with Israel, a reality that is explained in terms of the character of the people. Israel is circumcised in the flesh—consecrated for service to Yahweh alone—but uncircumcised, as it were, in the heart. Their tendency to lust, idol worship, and debauchery

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the main verb and עָרְלָה (‘orlā) in construct with a noun other than בָּשָׂר ([bāšor] cf. Gen 17:11, 13, 14).

<sup>27</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 40. The most common form is לֵב (lēb), which occurs 598 times in the Old Testament, whereas לֵבֹב (lēbob) occurs 252 times.

<sup>28</sup> Out of more than 800 occurrences of “heart” in the Old Testament, it is interesting that only five refer to the anatomical heart—1 Sam 25:37; 2 Sam 17:14; 2 Kgs 9:24; Hos 13:8; Jer 4:19. See Wolff, 41–42.

<sup>29</sup> Wolff, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Wolff, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Wolff, 55.

<sup>32</sup> When in conjunction with circumcision/uncircumcision—the concern of Deuteronomy 10:16—לֵב/לֵבֹב (lēb/lēbob) always appropriates the understanding to a metaphorical sense. The מוֹל-לֵבֹב (mwl-lēbob) construction appears only in Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, and Jeremiah 4:4, while the עָרְל-לֵבֹב (‘arēl-lēbob) construction appears in Leviticus 26:41 and Ezek 44:7, 9. None of these texts concern physical circumcision, but rather the heart as the nucleus of the character and will.



is evidenced in their history. In Deut 9:1–10:11, Israel's character is presented negatively through the recollection of a series of events aimed at emphasizing their sin. The Moab generation, however, must mind the sins of their fathers and no longer stiffen their necks (10:16b).<sup>33</sup> Their desire, no doubt, is to remain in the covenant with Yahweh and to have offspring. So through Moses's preaching they are imbued with a stricter requirement—to mind the heart by repenting of past sin and love Yahweh above all else. The reason/motivation for the command to circumcise the heart is given in 10:17b: Yahweh is sovereign, powerful, and impartial (i.e. he takes no bribe). Therefore, the command to circumcise is not primarily about identity as an Israelite. That is secondary. The command to circumcise is primarily about identity before Yahweh, their sovereign king.<sup>34</sup>

Moses concludes this section with a synthesis in 11:1 in which the central command of Deut 10:12–11:1 is the same as Deut 6:4–9: loving Yahweh is supreme. The metaphorical circumcision "of the heart" is the way in which Israelites show unqualified devotion to Yahweh, being mindful of past faults, repenting of those faults, and fully devoting oneself to Yahweh. In sum, this passage presents a unified picture. The true "sign" of being in Yahweh's covenant is not merely external (through rites like circumcision) but primarily internal, that is, full commitment of devotion and love to Yahweh and his Torah from the heart.

### C. DEUTERONOMY 30:1–10

Along with Deut 6:4–9 and 10:12–11:1, heart devotion as the core aspect of the law figures into a passage on covenant reaffirmation in Deut 30:1–10. This text presupposes the lengthy curses in chapters 26–28 and the covenant renewal in chapter 29. Its structure follows a series of conditional statements bracketed by the particle כִּי (kīy),<sup>35</sup> highlighting the conditions for

<sup>33</sup> English translations conceal the pun in this phrase. The previous generation was constantly referred to as a "stiff-necked people" (Exod 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:6; 31:2). A new generation is reminded not to "stiffen your necks," but to walk in the love of Yahweh by means of circumcision of the heart. Cf. Beth LaNeel Tanner, "Deuteronomy 10:12–22," *Interpretation* 55, no. 1 (2001): 62.

<sup>34</sup> The truth about God's sovereignty, power, and impartiality brings about a parallel command in 10:19a, to "love the sojourner" in the land. The grounds for this love is gratitude to Yahweh for his mercy on the Israelites when they were "sojourners" in Egypt (10:19b). This command in relation to the injunction to love neighbor in Matt 22 should be explored in more detail. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 201.

<sup>35</sup> McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 424, argues that the structure represents a chiasm:

A Protasis (30:1–2)  
                   B Main apodosis (30:3–7)  
                           C Central exhortation (30:8)  
                   B' Apodosis (30:9)  
           A' Protasis (30:10)

A few other scholars have noted this chiasmus: Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy: Faithless Israel, Faithful Yahweh in Deuteronomy*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Miltin Keynes, ENG: Paternoster, 2004), 166; Timothy A. Lenchak, *Choose Life!: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28, 69–30, 20*, *Analecta Biblica*

Israel's restoration in terms of repentance formulas.<sup>36</sup> In order for forgiveness to be offered after Israel sins, three responses are necessary in 30:1–2:

- (1) to be mindful of the blessings and curses of chapter 26–28
- (2) to turn to Yahweh (שוב [šûb])
- (3) to listen to his voice (שמע [šēma<sup>ʿ</sup>])

Only then will Yahweh return their fortunes and have compassion on them; that is, he will offer forgiveness. The emphasis on שוב (šûb) and שמע (šēma<sup>ʿ</sup>) in these verses is notable, which recalls the *Shema* in Deut 6.<sup>37</sup> The same words also appear twice in 30:10: Yahweh will make the Israelites prosperous (1) if they hear/obey his voice (כי תשמע [kî tišma<sup>ʿ</sup>]), and (2) if they turn to him (כי תשוב [kî tāšûb]).<sup>38</sup> The intensity of each conditional statement in both 30:1–2, 10 is highlighted with the language of Deut 6:5: “with all your heart and soul.”

The context, therefore, reveals that the unit as a whole is about repentance, with results listed 30:4–9. If the Israelites repent from sin and obey Yahweh's voice he will,

- (1) bring them back from great distances (30:4)
- (2) allow them to repossess the land and become more prosperous than ever (30:5)
- (3) radically change their character by means of circumcision of the heart (30:6a)

The focus on the heart in verses 1–2 and 10 is, therefore, central to the main thrust of 30:1–10. As argued above, לֵב/לִבָּב (lēb/lēḇob) most likely means the mind and the will, which here is transformed by means of repentance (שוב [šûb]) and obedience (שמע [šēma<sup>ʿ</sup>]). This idea is manifested in 30:6b. With a circumcised heart, Israel would possess the ability “to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” The purpose is given at the end of the sentence: “so that you might live.” In the instance in Deuteronomy 30:6, however, it is not only “your heart” that is in view—that

129 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 178. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, WBC vol. 6B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 735–37. Although some have v. 6 as the center, there seems to be a clear syntactical break in v. 8 with the emphatic אִתָּהּ (we'attâ), which follows a series of unbroken wəqatal verbs in vv. 5–7. This would suggest that v. 8 is central and not v. 6.

<sup>36</sup> The clauses in v. 1, 10 could certainly be temporal, “when,” but the line between a conditional and a temporal seems vague in this instance. In context both ideas are understandable syntactically, and the shift in v. 4 seems naturally to be the apodosis. Therefore, I am calling this a conditional clause instead of a temporal one, understanding the כִּי (kî) as “if” and introducing the protasis in vv. 1–2 and 10.

<sup>37</sup> A. Rofer, “The Covenant in the Land of Moab (Dt 28,69–30,20): Historico-Literary, Comparative, and Form-Critical Considerations,” in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt Und Botschaft*, ed. Norbert Lohfink, BETL 68 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1985), 311.

<sup>38</sup> With the accusative קוֹל (qôl), שמע (šēma) most likely means to hear or obey. Cf. s. v. “שמע,” Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), vol 4, 1572.

is, an Israelite's heart—but also “the heart of your offspring.” Like the verses that follow the *Shema*, this directive has a pedagogical function, and thus follows the main gist of the book as a whole (cf. 6:7, 20–25).

Most importantly, the emphasis in 30:6 is that “*Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart*,” whereas in 10:16 the command was for the Israelites to circumcise their own hearts. The shift here reflects a prophetic perspective, as Moses envisages the failure of Israel to keep the covenant as an accomplished fact.<sup>39</sup> *Yahweh's* promise to act (30:6) is underscored by the call to repent (10:16).

This instance of circumcision in Deuteronomy is similar to 10:16 in that spiritual circumcision is highlighted instead of circumcision as external identification. Ethnic identity is primarily about internal realities, that is, whether one is repenting of past sin and living in obedience to *Yahweh's* law. These ideas are requirements for ongoing faithfulness and form the very core of covenantal commitment (cf. Deut 6:4–5).<sup>40</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

In sum, if we consider the substance of Deut 30 as a peroration, then combined with Deut 6:4–9 and 10:12–11:1, these texts offer a certain thematic closure to the book as a whole, which is thus: the religion of the heart—encapsulated in the injunction to love *Yahweh*—stresses the priority not of love over law (or one system over another) but love within the law.<sup>41</sup> What are the distinctive features of love in Deuteronomy? Four things:

- (1) It is a love that can be commanded.
- (2) It is a love intimately related to fear and reverence.
- (3) It is a love reflected in repentance (circumcision of the heart)
- (4) It is a love that must be expressed by loyalty, devotion, service, and obedience to the demands of the law.<sup>42</sup>

These features make “love” the greatest commandment of the law according to Jesus, both in one's disposition to God and to neighbor. Even the lawyer who brought up this topic with Jesus seemed to agree (e.g. Mark 12:32, “You are right, Teacher.”), which means it is not a novel idea. It is not “trust” or “fear” or “obey,” although those things naturally follow from love; rather, it is love in the covenantal sense. Why? Two reasons.

<sup>39</sup> McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 427.

<sup>40</sup> Gerhard von Rad notes, “Our text can no longer be called an exhortation; it contains no admonitions, but, with regard to Israel's future, simply affirmative propositions, that is, it is clothed altogether in the style of prophetic predictions.” Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 183. Cf. also Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 389.

<sup>41</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew & Mark*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E Garland, Revised, vol. 9, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 524.

<sup>42</sup> Moran, “Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” 78.

First, because “love” in Deuteronomy 6, 10, and 30 (and in the Bible generally) is more than mere emotion. Love is a principle of action. When the Israelites uttered the *Shema*, they were declaring their complete, undivided, and unqualified devotion to Yahweh. Further, when the Israelites were tempted to sin against Yahweh by giving themselves over to other gods, the *Shema* provided a constant reminder to devote themselves to Yahweh alone. That is the biblical notion of love: not a pleasant disposition, but a covenantal commitment. The biblical ideal is perfectly illustrated in marriage because the bond between husband and wife is not demonstrated by romantic passion, but actions rooted in covenant that seek the well-being of the spouse, even when sacrifice is required.

Second, while the fear of Yahweh remains a central command throughout the OT (e.g. Prov 1:7; Eccl 12:13), “love” captures the essence of what fear actually means. It is not fear of the unknown, nor fear of Yahweh’s power, although that’s certainly true in one sense (e.g. Ps 119:120). But fear in the covenantal sense is the awe-inspiring, motivating love for God that leads to obedience and a life of blessing (Deut 6:1–3). Without fear, there is no sense of respect of God for his gracious salvation, nor gratitude for making his presence known and living to tell the tale (Deut 5:24). What Moses has in mind with fear defined by love is not obeisance, but obedience. It is not worry, but worship. It is not fleeing from the presence of Yahweh, but drawing near to him, and longing to do his will.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, the saints are those who “love Yahweh” and “hate evil” (Ps 97:10). David says, “I love you, O Yahweh, my strength” (Ps 18:1). Solomon “loved Yahweh, walking in the statutes of David his father” (1 Kgs 3:3). The author of Psalm 116 says, “I love Yahweh, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy” (Ps 116:1). The command for all people is “Love Yahweh, all you his saints” (Ps 31:23).

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that he came to fulfill the law, not reinterpret it (Matt 5:17). And love is the fulfillment of the law. Christian love in the NT, therefore, is the same as its counterpart in the Old. It is the hallmark of what it means to be disciples of Christ (John 13:34–35), involving reverential acts of submission and obedience to his commandments as worship: “If you love me,” Jesus says, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses* (New York, Norton: 2019), 439.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley extolls the intimate relationship between law and gospel: “On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to the gospel; on the other, the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of the law.” Quoted in William M. Arnett, “John Wesley and the Law,” *The Asbury Seminary* 35, no. 4 (1980): 26.