

# DEUTERONOMY 2

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## **Deuteronomy 2:1–23**

The travels of the Israelites after their near forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. The Lord directed them to pass by their cousins who were Lot's and Esau's descendants.

**2:1. “*then we turned . . . as the Lord spake.*”** This language seems to purposefully return to the Lord's original instruction in Deuteronomy 1:40 (the Hebrew construction is identical in both verses except for the verb conjugation). This language recalls with tragic irony the very same words from when God instructed them to “turn about and march” in 1:7. Now, their humbling defeat by the Amorites (see 1:42–44) had finally worked its effect. Delayed and coming at a terrible cost, at last they were willing to let God prevail.

The rest of chapter 2 through 3:29 chronicles God's ability to fulfill His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would ultimately inherit this land despite all outwardly perceived evidence to the contrary (see 1:8).

The word *turn* here provides more spiritual insight into the meaning of true discipleship. About this, Elder Theodore M. Burton wrote,

The word used in [in the Hebrew Bible] to refer to the concept of repentance is *shube*. We can better understand what *shube* means by reading a passage from Ezekiel and inserting the word *shube*, along with its English translation. To the “watchmen” appointed to warn Israel, the Lord says:

Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from [*shube*] it; if he do not turn from [*shube*] his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. . . .

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from [*shube*] his way and live. ([Ezekiel] 33:8–11)

I know of no kinder, sweeter passage in the Old Testament than those beautiful lines. In reading them, can you think of a kind, wise, gentle, loving Father in Heaven pleading with you to *shube*, or turn back to him—to leave unhappiness, sorrow, regret, and despair behind and turn back to your Father’s family, where you can find happiness, joy, and acceptance among his other children?

That is the message of the Old Testament. Prophet after prophet writes of *shube*—that turning back to the Lord, where we can be received with joy and rejoicing.<sup>1</sup>

**2:2–8.** The command to pass through Seir (the land of the Edomites).

**2:5. “I will not give you of their land.”** The Israelite conquest was not indiscriminate. As noted in Deuteronomy 1:7–8, the Lord established very specific borders to the twelve tribes’ land inheritance. Here, and again in verses 9 and 19, the Lord adamantly protected the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites, because these peoples also had received divine land grants (they were also blood relations to the Israelites, noted in 2:4; see also 23:8).

It is theologically instructive to see God’s particular love for all His children as the architect of every nation’s history.<sup>2</sup> We learned in Genesis that though Ishmael and Esau did not inherit the birthright blessings, they were still descendants of Abraham, and the Lord ensured they were recipients of certain covenant promises as part of Abraham’s seed. On the other side of the coin, the Lord did not esteem Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph, who did inherit the birthright, as superior to his siblings, but in fact had “raised [Joseph] up to be a servant” in “saving [Jacob’s] house from death” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 48:8).

In other words, Abraham and his direct seed are not esteemed any greater by the Lord than their cousins who had not yet sinned away His promises.

**2:7. “he knoweth thy walking . . . thou hast lacked nothing.”** Here the Lord reminded the Israelites that their needs were all divinely accounted for during their nearly four-decade sojourn. This foreshadows Jesus’s later instructions to both His Jerusalem and Bountiful leadership: “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? . . . for your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all

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1 Theodore M. Burton, “The Meaning of Repentance,” *Ensign*, August 1988.

2 See Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26. See also Amos 9:7: “Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?”

these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:25, 32–33; 3 Nephi 13:24, 32–33).

This is a recurring theme in Deuteronomy. Moses voiced the Lord’s concern that in their new land flowing with milk and honey, the Israelites could forget the Providence of their continued sustenance.

**2:9–16.** The command to pass through Moab.

**2:14.** *“until all the generation of the men of war were wasted out from among the host.”*

While the Lord is merciful beyond our ability to imagine (see 1 Corinthians 2:9), His commitment to justice is equally infinite and eternal. In the debacle of the ten spies’ first approach to the Amorite-held lands when they faithlessly followed their own wills, the Lord had pronounced a condemnation upon those “men of war” that they would die before any of the Israelites would be able to inherit the promised land.<sup>3</sup> Sadly those “men of this evil generation” (Deuteronomy 1:35) would never enjoy the promised land and thus relegated themselves to the liminal outlands by tragically wasting their wonderful potential.

**2:17–23.** The command to bypass the Ammonites. Chronologically, this is out of order as Sihon and the Amorites’ territory is geographically south of the Ammonites’. The order of these verses is likely due to the author’s desire to bunch together the Lord’s instructions to the Israelites regarding the peaceful bypass of their cousins before the narrative crescendo of the Israelite victories.

## **Deuteronomy 2:24–37**

The beginning of the conquest of the promised land, starting with the territory of the Amorites. In a reversal of their earlier defeat, the children of Israel are divinely empowered to overcome the wicked Amorites.

**2:31.** *“begin to possess that thou mayest inherit.”* In contrast to the account in Numbers, Deuteronomy claims that the God-led conquest of the promised land began while the Israelites were still on the eastern side of the Jordan River, marked by this battle with Sihon, the king of the Amorites. Here they gained important tribal lands that would be inherited by half the tribes of Reuben and Gad in what is called Transjordan, meaning east of the Jordan River.

As this phrase suggests, possession begins a process of inheritance. However, inheriting is not simply owning the deed of occupancy, much less simply living on a piece of land; no, inheriting is a judgment of character. One who is judged an heir is not a servant, nor even a friend, but family (see Romans 8:14–17).

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 1:35. Caleb and Joshua were the exceptions because of their original and ongoing faithfulness; see verses 36, 38.

If one wonders why the Lord did not use natural means like a plague or a natural disaster to clear off the offending nations, we admittedly lack a specific verse or scriptural passage providing divine explanation. Likely, as with other tests of obedience, the Lord knew that the Israelites' consecrated conquest would not only garner possession of the promised land but would also have the double effect of producing that spiritual strength only obtainable when a person exercises the faith in God necessary to accomplish His command.

Elder Carlos E. Asay offered his reflections on the Lord's requirement that we do the work:

There was a time when I wondered why God did not take matters into his own hands and guarantee the salvation of mankind. For I knew that God was omnipotent and could, if he so willed, thunder his word over the earth and blaze his message across the skies with such convincing power that all men and women would join the Church. I also knew that he could build all the temples needed, perform all the genealogical research required, and do all else, single-handedly, letter perfect, and without any wasted motion. Yes, I knew that God could do it all by simple command without the help or intrusion of weak mortals.

As my understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ expanded, I saw the folly of a "one-man show." I realized that if my Heavenly Father took matters into his own hands and performed all the missionary, temple, and other priesthood services, he would (1) offend my previous agency in a manner similar to what Lucifer proposed before the world was formed (see Moses 4:1–3) and (2) deprive me of sanctifying experiences, just as an impatient, perfectionist father deprives a son of growth when he pushes him aside and does all the work by himself. . . . [An] all-wise and loving father involves his children in his work so that they may grow, learn, and become like him."<sup>4</sup>

**2:34. "utterly destroyed them."** Readers can be forgiven for being a bit horror-struck at the command to kill every man, woman, and child of the Amorites. In Exodus we learned that the Amorites were listed among the nations that the Lord said He would "drive out" in order for the Israelites to inherit this land that had been sworn to the Israelites' forefathers (see Exodus 33:1–3; 34:10–11). Why did the Lord so utterly condemn the Amorites? How is that possible when the Lord is so clearly committed to loving and saving His children and has so carefully kept all His promises and covenants to so many different nations, as clearly demonstrated in this chapter by His protection of the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites?

Grim as it is—and ceding to the Lord full judgment in these matters of life and death—we do have insight from the Bible and Book of Mormon as to why these peoples may have lost their right to land and life. Leviticus describes some of the abominations practiced by the seven main nations who had been living in the promised land for several hundred years before the Exodus (namely, the Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites). Apparently ritual child sacrifice, the

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4 Carlos E. Asay, "Instruments of Righteousness," *New Era*, June 1983, 4.

breakdown of the family, and a multitude of sexual perversions had become normal for these cultures (Leviticus 18:1–30; 20:1–5). The Lord codified such wickedness as capital offenses for the Israelites as well (see Leviticus 20:2, 9–16).

Nephi explained to his brothers, who struggled to understand the nature of God and His dealings with all His children through the ages, that the only explanation for why the Lord condemned these people is that “this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them” (1 Nephi 17:35). Nephi was clear: “the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God” and “the Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and he hath created his children that they should possess it. And he raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked” (1 Nephi 17:35–37).

Processing the specter of the Amorite’s gross wickedness and their destruction (especially at the hands of the righteous Israelites) is challenging for many. Gratefully, the full array of gospel principles and truths equips each disciple with an eternal perspective: death in the grand plan of happiness is but a door into another phase of learning and probation prior to the resurrection. These ancient spirit brothers and sisters of ours were ushered into the spirit world, where they would eventually be taught the fullness of the gospel with all the others “in the great world of the spirits of the dead” who were also in self-imposed “darkness and under the bondage of sin” (Doctrine and Covenants 139:57).

Despite the seeming finality of a wicked person’s or people’s passing, we are taught that the Father’s love yet offers avenues of salvation even after death. “The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God. And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:58–59).

**2:36–37. “not one city too strong for us.”** Purged of their rebelliousness, this new generation of Israelites became powerful—an exact reversal of their fathers’ powerlessness a generation earlier.

**2:37. “nor unto whatsoever the Lord our God forbade us.”** True discipleship requires exactness (see Alma 57:21). Going forward, the record shows that Israel became unfailingly successful when (and only when) they were careful to let God fully prevail in every detail. Moses continually reminded that the Lord can work with men and women of Christ who are committed to His will, not their own, who are willing to allow His sight to replace their own. This exacting faith produces power to accomplish His every command.

President Russell M. Nelson promised, “Nothing opens the heavens quite like the combination of increased purity, exact obedience, earnest seeking, daily feasting on the words of Christ in the Book of Mormon, and regular time committed to temple and family history work.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” April 2018 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.