



Teaching Deuteronomy Using Dr. King's 'Mountaintop' Speech

By Isaac Alderman

While I suspect that Deuteronomy is often skipped over in survey courses, it can provide an opportunity to engage students who might not normally be interested in the Bible. In addition to teaching significant themes of Deuteronomy, this discussion activity can allow you to highlight the Civil Rights movement, its use of Exodus imagery and the legacy of Dr. King. In this way, it can appeal to students who are more interested in American history, or Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement, than they are in the biblical text.

Dr. King's famous 'Mountaintop' speech, a moving address he gave the night before his assassination, has significant points of contact with Deuteronomy, which is itself presented as a speech by Moses. Like Dr. King's speech, which students can listen to ahead of time or in class, Deuteronomy asserts that the *success* of the people depends on understanding the *past* and the *future* and on *leadership* and *obedience*.

Much of Deuteronomy is legal code and is not interesting reading to young people (they don't care that Israel is not to "plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together," [Deut 22:10] for example). I recommend assigning the first six and the last five chapters. Some important highlights are a version of the Ten Commandments (or **Decalogue**, 5:6-21), the **Shema** (6:4), a succinct presentation of the theme that success and obedience are inextricable (30:15-18) and the death of Moses (chapter 34).

Some examples of the correlations between the two speeches:

- King begins the speech by referencing the Exodus ("I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek")
- He consistently refers to African Americans as 'God's children,' the same language he uses to describe those fleeing Egypt
- King clearly self-identifies as Moses, their leader, but also as one of them. Like Moses, he:
 - Instructs them on how to behave, particularly after he has left them (cf. Deut 4)
 - Consistently weaves throughout the shadow of his own death (cf. Deut 1:35-37)
 - Recites their shared experience (e.g. "if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters..."); Moses addresses the people, recounting their experiences most often in first person 'we' and 'us' (cf. Deut 1:6, 2:1, 3:1, etc.)
 - Goes to the mountaintop and sees the promised land, but will not enter it (cf. Deut 34, esp. 34:4)

Of particular note is the climax of the speech (beginning about 1 minute from the end). As soon as he mentions the mountain, even before a reference to the Promised Land, the audience explodes with emotion. The people clearly understand that he is Moses and, consequently, they too are involved in an exodus. It is evidence of their biblical literacy that this simple reference has wrapped up these themes found earlier in the speech and has conjured up all of the imagery and meaning found in Deuteronomy.

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<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

This site has audio and transcript of the speech, as well as a short video clip.

Glossary

Decalogue: A Greek term, meaning ten words, used to refer to the Ten Commandments

Shema: Found in Deut 6:4, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one,' is the heart of many Jewish prayers and is often recited daily. It is the closest thing that Judaism has to a creed.

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>