

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you

In weeks reading, from Parashat Re'eh (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17*), Moshe says “*See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse.*” Moshe says the blessing comes if we “*listen and obey.*” The curse comes to those who turn aside from the way God has commanded. Moshe states that when the Lord brings you into the land, place the blessing on mount Gerizim and the curse on mount Ebal. These form the southern side of the valley in which Nablus is situated on the north side, and is one of the highest peaks in the West Bank and all of Israel. The blessing and the curse represents those who remain “*within*” the Lord’s covenant (הַבְּרִיָּה on Gerizim) and those who remain “*outside*” of the covenant (הַקְּלָלָה on Ebal). Those inside the covenant live inside of the Promised Land and enjoy the blessing and protection of God. Those outside have no part in God’s protection and promises. Moshe is contrasting blessing and cursing, and those who remain within or without the covenant of God depends upon whether one listens and obeys.

שְׁדוּקָה יִבְתַּח / The Holy Scriptures

ספר דברים פרק יא

Devarim / Deuteronomy 11:26-28

כּוּ רְאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה וּקְלָלָה: כּוּ אֶת-הַבְּרִיָּה
 אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם
 הַיּוֹם: כּוּ וְהַקְּלָלָה אִם-לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
 וְסָרְתֶם מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְלַכֵּת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים
 אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתֶּם:

*11:26 ‘See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse:
 11:27 the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord
 your God, which I am commanding you today; 11:28 and the curse,
 if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God,
 but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by
 following other gods which you have not known. (NASB)*

In this week’s reading, Moshe speaks of a blessing and a curse that depends upon whether one listens or does not listen to the mitzvot (commands) of Lord our God. The example that Moshe provides is that the blessing belongs to those who are in a covenant relationship with the Lord. Consequentially, those who are cursed are those who are outside of a covenant relationship with the Lord. While reading *Tehillim / Psalms 23*, David makes a similar contrast on the covenant of God in Psalm in *23:4*. David says *גַּם כִּי-אֶלֶף בְּגִיָּא צַלְמוֹת לֹא-אִירָא רַע כִּי-אֶתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ הֵמָּה יִנְחַמְנִי: 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (NASB)* According to David, the rod and staff they comfort him. How does the rod and staff of God provide comfort? Taking a closer look at the Psalm, we learn that David uses these two Hebrew Words, שִׁבְטֶךָ and מִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ. The word שִׁבְטֶךָ from the root שבט means (noun) “*rod, stick, or tribe, clan,*” and the word מִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ from the root שׁען means (verb) “*to lean*” and (noun) “*to support, rest, prop; assistance, welfare.*” Researching the biblical usage of these words, it is interesting according to the Torah, when Moshe refers to a “*staff, rod, branch*” he uses the word מִטָּה, whereas when he refers to “*tribe*” he uses the word שבט. What is David trying to say here in *Tehillim / Psalms 23:4* using the words שִׁבְטֶךָ and מִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ? Thinking on the meaning of a shepherds staff throughout the Scriptures, we think of protection against our enemies, to discipline, to guide, and to rescue. In addition to this, a royal scepter is also known as a rod and a rod is frequently mentioned as a weapon. The staff or rod was also symbolic of authority, as for example the scepter that stands between the king’s feet. Was this the imagery that David is trying to portray using the words שִׁבְטֶךָ and מִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ? David begins this verse saying *גַּם כִּי-אֶלֶף בְּגִיָּא צַלְמוֹת לֹא-אִירָא רַע כִּי-אֶתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ: 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.* David is confident the Lord is with him because of the covenant relationship that he has with the Lord. This may be the reason David uses the word שבט which also has the meaning “*tribe or clan.*” A person who is living among the tribes of Israel are living in the covenant blessing as is described in this week’s reading. This applies whether one is native born or a ger (stranger) who lives in the midst of Israel. In addition to this, paying particular attention to the NASB translation, the translators translated שִׁבְטֶךָ and מִשְׁעֲנֶתֶךָ as “*Your rod and Your staff;*” the words are not so much expressive of the “*rod and staff*” imagery as much as it is expressing emphasis upon the Covenant of God with His people (the tribes of Israel), and the one upon whom we are to lean, an implied reference that we are to lean upon the Lord God Almighty. Remaining in the covenant relationship with the Lord, we are comforted in His presence. This leads to our understanding that He cares for us, protects us, and guides us in His holy word. He is Lord and King over the community, over relationships, over individual lives, and essentially all of who we are. It is interesting to read, based on this understanding, how the rabbis interpret this verse in the Psalms. The Aramaic Targum states *23:4 Indeed, when I go into exile by the plain of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for your word is my help, your straight staff and your Torah, they will comfort me. (EMC)* The rabbis translate “*your straight staff and your Torah, they will comfort me.*” They have come to the conclusion that David is in fact speaking within a covenant context and that he does not fear and the Lord will guide him according to His word. The important point of studying these Scriptures is seeing the dual usage of the word Shevat (שבט) as both a staff (scepter) and tribe (see *Bereshit / Genesis 49:10*). A Shevat (שבט) is a descendant of a person and matteh (מִטָּה) is a “*staff, rod, branch.*” There is a deep spiritual meaning here that David is bringing out in his Psalm and similarly in the Torah portion this week. In David’s Psalm we see the dual usage of the word Shevat (שבט) as a reference to God’s protection that is found within the covenant relationship. The staff, rod, scepter, and tribe are all interconnected. In a similar manner, Moshe’s plea to the children of Israel in *Devarim / Deuteronomy 11:26-28* saying the blessing comes if they “*listen and obey,*” reveals to us that listening and obeying is an important factor of remaining in a covenant relationship with the Lord. We are saved in Christ, now are we remaining “*in Christ*” by listening and obeying? (*John 15:7*) What does it mean to abide in Christ?