

***YHWH'S Cult: Reading Deuteronomy Through the Lens of the Bildung Tradition
and F.P. Demeterio's "Dialogical Hermeneutics" Framework***

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Abstract

Many people perceive the Book of Deuteronomy as “the second law,” following its etymology. It has been misunderstood because of the mistaken rendering of the Septuagint as “this second law” (deuteronomion); should have been correctly translated as “a copy of this law,” however. This may also be precisely the reason of our indifferent feeling towards Deuteronomy as somewhat a “collection” of dry ordinances and testimonies that have little relation to the life of the spirit, justification by faith, and perfection of freedom. This paper presents, in a qualitative manner, the inseparability and indissolubility of the theologico-historico-sociological dimension of Israel as a nation and as a believer – on how the faith-struggle of the people of Israel, during and after their entry into the Promised Land, is intertwined in their history and recollection of the past. Through the lens of the Bildung Tradition, and F.P. Demeterio's “Dialogical Hermeneutics” Framework, this paper will try to analyze and show the central theme of the Book – the call towards an interpersonal relationship between God and Israel – from a humanistic-constructivist point-of-view. Situating Deuteronomy in its proper setting and actual form in history, defining the unique character of Israel as “God's chosen people,” it also aims to magnify the impact of the message of Deuteronomy in contemporary times – that our faith (generically, “belief in the Divine”) cannot be divorced from our common life. Thus, this paper hopes to contribute to the renewed appreciation and intellectualization of the Scriptures in the Philippines, relevant to the K-12 Program.

Keywords: Israel, Deuteronomic history, Bildung Tradition, F.P. Demeterio, dialogical hermeneutics

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Introduction

At first glance, many people perceive the Book of Deuteronomy as “the second law,” following its etymological analysis. It has been wrongly understood because of the mistaken rendering of the Septuagint as “this second law” (deuteronomion); should be correctly understood as “a copy of this law.”

This may also be the reason of our indifferent feeling towards the Book of Deuteronomy as somewhat a collection of dry statutes, testimonies and ordinances that have a little relation to the life of the spirit, justification by faith and perfection of freedom.

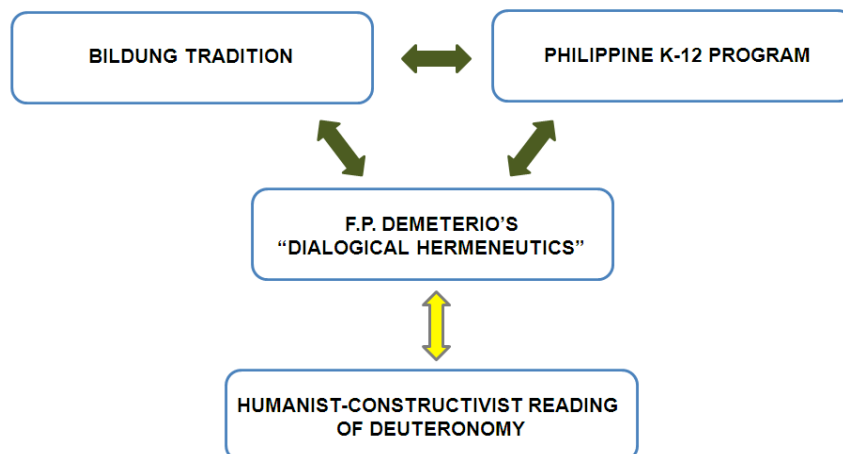
However, contemporary scholars agree that Deuteronomy is an original synthesis of the sacred traditions, customs and institutions of Israel. It presents the basic biblical understanding of the nature of YHWH, of his people, of his covenant, of the relation of law and grace, and of worship and of ethical life. It does not only state, but fully expound, the “first and the greatest commandment” (Deut. 6:4-9).

The promulgation of RA 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013) in the Philippines provides a great avenue for Religious Education students in the Philippine K-12 Program to deepen their intellectual and academic understanding of Sacred Scriptures which, in turn affects their everyday faith-life balance, for there is an explicit detach between theory and *praxis* as to religious belief and living.

From Deuteronomy, we can see the faith-struggle of the wandering people of Israel before their entry into the Promised Land, intertwined in their history and recollection of the past. It is never just a collection of legalistic ordinances that demands blind faith. Rather, Deuteronomy is a wellspring that cradles God’s love, mercy and a unique character: YHWH, the God who first promised.

Hence, using the Bildung Tradition and F.P. Demeterio’s “dialogical hermeneutic” framework, we will be able to situate and treat Deuteronomy in its proper setting and actual form, as well as its inescapable importance to the covenantal life of Israel: YHWH’s “exclusive” cult.

Framework



YHWH, a “god” apart and of another order

The opening passage of the Book of Deuteronomy is a recollection of the Sinai event – the covenant made [and initiated] by YHWH (God) to His people Israel at Horeb (or Sinai) through Moses. It thus begins, “*These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel...*”

Most bible historians agree that the Book of Deuteronomy was written ca. 7th century (Alexander Rofé, 2002), preferably a few years after Israel took possession of Canaan. More so, scholars agree that the sacred writers of the Book of Deuteronomy recalled God’s covenant to the Patriarchs and to Moses (Mosaic tradition) to counteract the faith crisis of those times. Because of Israel’s Exile experience, exposure and intermingling with the culture of their oppressors resulted into a radical secularization of Israel’s *modus vivendi*. Syncretism of sacred traditions, customs and institutions became the problem of the elders elected for the care of YHWH’s people. YHWH, “the God who brought Israel out of Egypt’s slavery” was worshipped in the plurality of manifestations – Usher, Baal and the like (Fuller, 1984).

Hence, the Book of Deuteronomy is often described as “preached law” – a call to a total dedication to YHWH (Freitheim, 1983).

1. The Patriarchs and the *berith*¹ of YHWH.

In order to understand the essence and the necessity of such remembering of the covenant, we have to go back to the story of the “founding Fathers” of the Hebrew faith.

The Judaic heritage can be traced back to the time of the Patriarchs – the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their memory is remembered in the passages of the Sacred Scriptures and in the traditions of Israel, every time YHWH renews His covenant with Israel.²

The biblical narrators (hagiographers) recorded singular events in connection with the Patriarchs. YHWH revealed Himself to the Patriarchs, in a mysterious yet conclusive manner; he “spoke” to them, and announced certain things to them.³

In a diagram form, we can see the parallel structure of YHWH’s revelation of Himself to the Patriarchs – to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

ABRAHAM Gen. 12: 1-4	ISAAC Gen. 26: 2-6	JACOB Gen. 28: 13-15
<p>Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."</p> <p>"I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."</p> <p>So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.</p>	<p>The Lord appeared to him (Isaac) and said... "Stay in this land and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham."</p> <p>" I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandment, my statutes, and my laws."</p> <p>So Isaac settled in Gerar.</p>	<p>And the Lord stood beside him and said, " I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;</p> <p>and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and wherever you go, and will you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.</p> <p>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely, the Lord is in this place (Bethel) and I did not know it!"</p>

Fig. 1

From here, we can see the “seeming” pattern of YHWH’s coming into communication with Israel: (1) YHWH “speaks,” (2) YHWH “promises,” (3) the Patriarch follows YHWH’s decrees, having assured of the “promise.” Central to the theophanies of YHWH is the commitment of YHWH Himself: it is YHWH who speaks, it is YHWH who promises, it is YHWH who blesses!

“I will be your God and you will be my people if you keep my commandments,” is a unique character of YHWH not found among other gods of their Mesopotamian ancestors, neither that of the Canaanite milieu.⁴ YHWH, from then on, will be “their” God. In turn, they found heaven’s favor because they are “YHWH’s people,” upon acceptance of His commands.

Now, they fled from the mythical influence of their pagan counterparts – they are no longer a “plaything of the gods.” It shows clearly that there is a personal relationship between the One God and those whom he “first called.” Moreover, Auzou (1963) comments that this covenant made by the One God, the One Lord, will always be remembered by Him, especially in times of distress, groaning and slavery.⁵

2. The “God” both loving and jealous.

The key question raised by Israel while in exile is, “Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused his great display of anger?” (Deut. 29:24). Their question is answered in the succeeding verses of the same account (25-28):

It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the LORD was kindled against the land, bringing on it every curse written on this book. The LORD uprooted them from their land

in anger, fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as is now the case.

From here, we have a deeper understanding of the loving character of YHWH – a God “exclusively in love” with the people of Israel; and at the same time “jealous” if love is not reciprocated back to Him. We may say this is not another character of YHWH; rather, inclusive of that same loving character.

The focus of the response is on **unfaithfulness to YHWH**, manifested fundamentally in the worship of other gods. Freitheim (1983) argues that the Exile experience is due, not to a God whose promises has been proven to be unreliable, but to Israel’s failure to be faithful (disloyalty) to YHWH, the God who has made and kept His promises.

Deuteronomy, thus, presents to us laws which are directly identified with the Mosaic covenant. That those who keep the law shall be blessed; and those who neglect shall experience the wrath of God. Here is the “God” who demands a faith-response, a concrete exchange of commitment.

Synthesis

Why is the opening passage of Deuteronomy a recall of the Sinai event?

Religious syncretism was the concomitant result of Israel’s possession of Canaan – the land promised by YHWH to the Patriarchs. Because of Israel’s Exile, exposure and intermingling with the culture of their oppressors resulted into a radical secularization of Israel’s *modus vivendi*. Syncretism of sacred traditions, customs and institutions became the problem of the elders elected for the care of YHWH’s people. YHWH, “the God who brought Israel out of Egypt’s slavery” was worshipped in the plurality of manifestations – Usher, Baal and the like.

The Book of Deuteronomy contains an account of what passed in the wilderness after the departure of the Israelites from Egypt to their sublime entrance into the Promised Land. As the Israelites were now about to enter into the Promised Land, and many of them had not witnessed the different transactions in the wilderness (the former generations having been all destroyed except Joshua and Caleb), the elders of Israel were compelled to impress into the hearts that deep sense of their obligation to God, and to prepare them for the inheritance which God had prepared for them.

This provides the justification why the prevailing theme of the first few chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy is the constant reminder to “be careful not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God made with you,” (Deut. 4:23): those who keep the law shall be blessed (similar to that of the Patriarchs); and those who neglect shall experience the wrath of God.

Israel, the Chosen People of God

After establishing, in passing, Deuteronomy’s portrayal of YHWH – the God who brought Israel out of Egypt’s slavery – we shall now try to explore the faith-response of Israel.

As what we have made mention already, Deuteronomy proclaims the love and mercy of God, the concrete actions by which he has redeemed, chosen and guided Israel, and the goal of the abundant life, as promised to the Patriarchs, in the land which he holds out as the final fulfillment to her (Israel). But at the same time, we must not forget that Deuteronomy, too, repeatedly admonishes Israel that she must respond to the call of YHWH and appropriate it for herself.

1. The Land: Israel's response to YHWH's testing place

This understanding of Israel's responsibility is spelled out in the gift of the land. By "the land," we understand Canaan – "the land I gave your fathers."

It is stated many times in the passages of Deuteronomy that YHWH *gives* Israel the land, but she must also *possess* it.⁶ YHWH brings Israel into the land, but she must also enter into it; He gives over her enemies into her hands, but she must also smite them. In short, God acts, but Israel must also act in response.

Achtemeier (1978), in her commentary about Israel's Diaspora, explains that Israel appropriates her salvation not by "some mystical escape from history, but by her actions within her specific historical situation." Throughout Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic history, the land is the place of testing for Israel – the place where she decides whether or not she will make of YHWH's gift and promises as her own. The journey towards the possession of the "the land," as well as "the land" itself, is the constant litmus of Israel's faith.

How then must Israel respond?

2. The response of *trust*

The first response required of Israel in Deuteronomy is the response of *trust* in YHWH's purpose for her. Looking back at the long history by which YHWH has made her His own and guided her to the land He promised, Israel's response must be a **basic belief** that YHWH, in fact, wants abundant life for her, and is working in her life (her daily life, for that matter) to achieve that goal. Hence, she must then trust that YHWH desires only the good for her, not evil. Israel's attitude in the wilderness is a contrast of such trust: "... you grumbled in your tent and said, 'It is because the Lord hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us. Where are we headed?'" (Deut. 1:27-28).

YHWH, by the pages of Deuteronomy, assures Israel that He indeed can (1) destroy her enemies before her; (2) He will not forsake her until He has given her abundant life and rest in the Promised Land because she knows YHWH is in their midst, fighting on their behalf.⁷

The persistent answer of Deuteronomy to this doubting question about "where they are headed" is the assurance that YHWH is moving them towards life, concretized in the abundant goodness of the land. (Achtemeier, 1978).

3. The response of *remembering and worship*

The trust made mention above must rest firmly on the memory of what YHWH has done in her past. Thus, Israel must *remember*.

Israel is to remember her slavery in Egypt (cf. Deut. 6:12; 24:22), and her deliverance in the Exodus (cf. 6:12; 8:14). She is to remember the covenant at Horeb-Sinai (cf. 4:9, 23) and her experiences in the wilderness (cf. 8:2, 14-16: 9:7; 24:9). She is to remember all “the days of old” and what YHWH did in them, and thus she will be able to trust YHWH’s love and power in the present and in the future of her history.

According to John Bright (1972), *remembering* in Deuteronomy is not simply a recollection of the past. It is rather “*to live into that history* that its events become contemporary and efficacious in the present.” The constant emphasis of *remembering* in Deuteronomy is the use of the phrase, “this day.”⁸ The past becomes present in Israel’s worship of YHWH.

There is no doubt that Deuteronomy emulates the reality of YHWH’s presence in the cult. The fact that Israel carries out her *worship before the LORD*, as well the reason why Israel can have a fellowship with YHWH, is because He has chosen the central sanctuary and has put His “name” there.

We shall not deal with the exegesis of the “name.” Nevertheless, the “name,” we are assured of by Achtemeier (1978), “represents YHWH’s real fellowship with His people, and at the same time, His sovereign demands that Israel worship in the place He so chooses.”

One concrete example of the making present of history, in Israel’s case, is the offering of the first fruits. The very ceremony is a historical recital of YHWH’s deeds, which is the center of the worship rite. As the individual worshipper confesses what YHWH has done, those past event becomes contemporaneous for him:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor and *he* went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien... When the Egyptians treated *us* harshly and afflicted *us*... *we* cried to the LORD... and the LORD brought *us* out of Egypt... So now *I* bring the first fruit of the ground, that you, O LORD, have given *me*.⁹

From here we can see that the worshipper (Israel) reaches communion with YHWH through the medium of history, which concretely defines the character of God and Israel’s election as His people.

4. Towards an authentic interpersonal relationship

From the Israel’s response of trust, remembering and worship, we can deduce a central theme – **love**. The central response required of Israel in Deuteronomy to the God whom she meets in history is the response of love, a response which will lead to an authentic interpersonal relationship.

According to Ernest Wright (1953), if we are going to examine the original text of Deuteronomy, the term used by the hagiographers is *`āhab* (אַהַבִּים). The term suggests “intense, interior, personal love of one family member to another.” That is why, the recurrent theme of Deuteronomy, according to scholars, is analogous to “father-son relationship:¹⁰” Israel is called to love YHWH with the love of a son to his father. Thus, Israel’s love is to be a devotion which flows spontaneously and freely from the heart, in gratitude and response to God’s fatherly love. Such heartfelt love is the center of the covenant relation in Deuteronomy.

Wright (1953) further explains that the use of *`āhab* suggests a compelling invitation, a call for love out of Israel’s “whole, undivided heart and soul,” out of Israel’s total person and existence.

Synthesis

God’s self-act of electing Israel as “the nations among every other nation,” prefigured in the history of the Patriarchs, required a response comparatively like that of Abraham. The faith by which Abraham, and the other Patriarchs, answered the call was the same attitude required for the continuity of His call for the generations to come.

This answer to YHWH’s call for faithfulness is spelled out clearly in Israel’s response of trust, remembering, worship and love. These responses are means to an end. The nation was called to a service which flowed from its special relationship to YHWH as “His” elect.

Especially by “remembering,” events of the past become contemporaneous, relevant and efficacious, and will bring forth an authentic interpersonal relationship between YHWH and Israel, as a father is to his son.

Yhwh and ‘His’ Covenant

At this point, we can see how, through the Book of Deuteronomy, YHWH is contrasted to the theme of the “angry and jealous God” supposed of the Old Testament. YHWH is rather depicted by the hagiographers of Deuteronomy as one who has proven to be faithful to the promises He Himself has given to the Patriarchs. He, too, has been proven to be the source of immeasurable blessings, although Israel has often proved herself to be faithless (i.e, lacking of trust in YHWH). God here is revealed as one who has been willing to make adjustments in working with the people, always taking new initiatives in dealing with negative situations.

There have been warnings of the consequences of unbelief again and again, particularly through the elders and the prophets, who, out of mercy, have been raised to speak to and for the people. God is portrayed as one who has been “moved to pity” time and again, always giving Israel countless chances to turn away from their disloyalties to their Creator and Redeemer.

1. *Shema Israel: Hear, O Israel!*¹¹

This passage, found in Deut. 6:4-9, contains the basic principle of the Law (Torah): **since the LORD alone is God, we must love him with an undivided heart and soul.** It is the canon, we may say, of how Israel can give her “whole heart and undivided soul” to YHWH: **to keep YHWH’s commandments.** It is the “first and the greatest commandment.”

“Love” in the Bible, whether on the part of Man or of God, is not a feeling, but an action. And just as YHWH “loved” Israel, by delivering her out of Egypt and guiding her through the wilderness and giving her the Promised Land, so Israel is to love YHWH by doing specific actions in obedience to YHWH’s will, that is, “take to heart these words, drill them into your children, speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest.”¹²

Found also in the pericope is the statute: “Bind them at your wrists as a sign... let them, be a pendant on your forehead... write them on the doorposts, etc.” Scholars agree that these provisions were probably meant to be understood in the figurative sense. However, later Jews took them literally.¹³

It is obvious that the relationship with YHWH must transcend legalistic understanding. YHWH continues to guide them by the means of the Law. He continues to be near them through the words of the Law, so that they can act wisely and thus enter into the fullness of life which YHWH desires for them. Freitheim (1983) expresses it beautifully: “The Law is not a burden for Israel. The Law is synonymous with the very presence of the zealous God. **By following God’s commandment, He will be with you always.**”

2. “That it may go well with you.”

Over and over again, YHWH tells His people that he desires loving obedience from them. The constant phrase echoing in every page of Deuteronomy is: “Obey the commandments ‘that it may go well with you.’¹⁴” He begs His people to live, and the life he holds out for them is a life overflowing with blessings and goodness – life in the “land of milk and honey.” Bernard Anderson (1975) adds that the burning desire of YHWH is that Israel will choose rightly because “it is ‘for your good’ always.” This is YHWH’s concrete expression of exclusivity.

The yearning love of YHWH for His people’s cause is almost overwhelming in Deuteronomy. However, it is not a love that will coerce Israel into her act of choosing. Rather, it is a love that asks the response of Israel’s heart to YHWH’s heart; Israel’s loyalty to YHWH’s loyalty. Israel is to love God because God has first loved her.

Synthesis

The exclusivity of the YHWH-Israel relationship, a dialectical relationship similar to that of a father-and-son, is better understood in the light of her election: YHWH, out His volitional act has chosen Israel to be His nation. And out of the monolatrous

response of the Patriarchs, YHWH always remembers the compact made. In turn, Israel is to emulate YHWH as a concrete response. Thus, exclusivity is established.

Yet, this response should not be interpreted as something legalistic. According to Miller (1969) the change in the essence of the theological formulation is evident in the definition and the conviction of Israel's status before YHWH: "that of a treasured people" – meaning, in the nature of a precious treasure by which the Owner prefers it to all of the rest of his vast property. Israel is loftier than all nations that YHWH created. She is also a "holy people," (Deut. 7:6), i.e., she is closer to YHWH, and is in a better position to serve Him than others.

Deuteronomy changed the basic formulation of the understanding of the covenantal relationship: from the generic "commitment-obligation" understanding to "exclusivity-election" paradigm. It simply expresses that what necessarily follows in God's volitional act of exclusivity is Israel's election to be YHWH's "apple of the eye."

Conclusion

The Book of Deuteronomy summarizes YHWH's over-all purpose and plan for the wandering Israel – from their deliverance from Egypt, to the possession of the land, to the daily life of gratuity to YHWH in that land "He has given to their fathers."

Deuteronomy, moreover, presented to us a "seemingly" peculiar picture of YHWH as the God of mercy and love: the God who is a father to his sons [and daughters], easily "moved to pity" upon seeing Israel suffering from the hands of the Egyptians, and gives Israel a chance to turn away from their disloyalties to their Creator and Redeemer. It is peculiar, in a sense, because we have a pre-casted (stereotyped) understanding of YHWH as the God who is jealous and easily gets angry. Deuteronomy discounts and proves the contrary to those who would suggest that YHWH, the God of the Old Testament, is an "evil God."

Moreover, the theme of the total dedication to YHWH in Deuteronomy is a clear statement of the fact that YHWH demands an exclusive exchange of commitment: **YHWH requires Israel's positive response, i.e., trust, remembering and worship** because "This day you have become the people of the LORD, your God." (Deut. 27:9). These are the gracious words with which the sinful Israel hears from Deuteronomy.

Although seemingly as mere repetition of Moses' instructions for Israel (*'elleh haddebarim*: הדברים אלה), we cannot deny the fact of the canonical status of Deuteronomy in the history and in the social dimension of Israel, for it (the Book of Deuteronomy) was deposited next to the Ark of Covenant, the concrete manifestation of YHWH's presence to "the people He has chosen to be His own."

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End Notes

¹ berith (בְּרִית): Hebrew word for “covenant.” In Greek, διαθήκη, “diatheke,” i.e., “disposition;” in Latin, “testamentum,” which means “attestation.”

² see Ex. 2:24; 3:6, 15-16; 6:3, 8.

³ see Gen. 12:1-3; 26:4; 28:14.

⁴ The story of Isaac (Gen. 22: 1-18), being spared by YHWH, is also an indicative of the unique character

of the God of Israel. This is something the gods of the neighboring tribes would not do.

⁵ see Deut. 4:31.

⁶ see Deut. 1:39; 3:18; 4:1.

⁷ “It is the LORD who goes before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you nor forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed.” (Deut. 31:8).

⁸ It is noteworthy to cite the following verses in Deuteronomy (2:25, 30; 4:38: 5:1, 3; 7:11, etc.)

⁹ cf. Deut. 26:5-10 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ see Deut. 8:5.

¹¹ It is good to note that the *Shema Israel* (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע) are the first two words of a section of the Torah, and is the title of a prayer that serves as a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. The first verse encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD alone." (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד).

¹² see Deut. 6:6-7.

¹³ The *shema* and the Decalogue were written on parchments and enclosed in small boxes called phylacteries, worn on the arms and forehead during morning prayers, or attached to doorposts of the house. Nevertheless, such action simply emphasizes the importance of YHWH's words as a guide for all of life. (Achteimeier, 1978).

¹⁴ see Deut. 4:40; 5:16; 6:2; 25:15.