

Deuteronomy 31:9-13 and the Mandate of Torah Reading: Reconstructing Community-Based Faith Education in the Postmodern Era

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Deuteronomy 31;
Torah Reading;
Faith Education;
Postmodernism;
Community-Based Pedagogy.

Article history:

Received 2026-04-27

Revised 2026-05-27

Accepted 2026-07-02

ABSTRACT

The postmodern epistemological landscape, characterized by radical relativism, institutional skepticism, and the fragmentation of communal identity, has precipitated a profound crisis in Christian faith transmission. Traditional pedagogical models, overly reliant on didactic propositionalism or individualistic experientialism, prove increasingly inadequate in forming resilient, covenant-keeping disciples. This article turns to the Old Testament, specifically the pericope of Deuteronomy 31:9-13, as a forgotten but normative blueprint for reconstructing community-based faith education. Through a rigorous exegetical analysis of the Hebrew text—focusing on the triadic imperative to "hear" (*shema*), "learn" (*lamad*), and "fear" (*yare*)—this study argues that the septennial mandate of public Torah reading offers a robust theological counter-narrative to postmodern disintegration. The article reconstructs three structural pillars from the text: (1) the objective authority of the canonical corpus against relativism, (2) the inclusive, intergenerational assembly (*qahal*) against hyper-individualism, and (3) the cyclical liturgical rhythm against ephemeral consumerism. Conclusively, the paper proposes a practical ecclesial model that recovers the public reading of Scripture, re-engineers multi-generational spaces, and reintegrates the Christian calendar as a pedagogical tool for holistic faith formation. This reconstruction positions the Deuteronomic mandate not as an archaic relic, but as a prophetic, counter-cultural pedagogy for the contemporary church.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary church inhabits a cultural landscape that is fundamentally inhospitable to the foundational presuppositions of historic, creedal Christianity. The intellectual and social conditions of postmodernity—what Jean-François Lyotard famously characterized as an "incredulity toward

metanarratives"—have systematically dismantled the epistemological certainties that once underpinned religious instruction and faith transmission. In this fragmented milieu, truth is no longer discovered but constructed; authority is no longer inherited but interrogated; and identity is no longer received from a community but curated by the autonomous individual. Tulung et al. (2024) have observed that postmodernism fundamentally calls into question the feasibility of traditional educational enterprises, as "postmodern relativism appears to undercut the possibility of justification, both inside and outside of education." Mohajel and Asghari (2023) extend this critique to the theological domain, arguing that by "questioning the ontological foundations of theology and rejecting absolutism and embracing pluralism and relativism, religious education has been placed in an anti-realistic postmodern framework" that substitutes transcendent, absolute values for localized, context-oriented perspectives.

The crisis extends beyond the academy into the lived experience of congregations, particularly affecting younger generations who have been most thoroughly socialized within postmodern sensibilities. Chrostowski (2024) notes that "the changes in religiousness, which affect especially the younger generations, are so strong that they call into question the validity of the current form of religious education." The pervasive dissemination of skepticism, relativism, and secularism has rendered traditional catechetical models increasingly ineffective in fulfilling their formative tasks. Ratzinger (2023) diagnosed this condition with characteristic precision, identifying at its core "two postmodern phenomena: relativism and secularism, leading people, above all young people, into spiritual regress and deformation." His response was unequivocal: the spiritual development of young people must become "the most urgent challenge and priority task" for all educators—parents, teachers, catechists, and clergy alike.

Within this context, conventional models of Christian education are struggling to remain viable. On one hand, the didactic, apologetic approach—which seeks to defend propositional truths against skeptical scrutiny—frequently devolves into sterile intellectualism that fails to captivate the postmodern heart, which yearns for authenticity and wonder. On the other hand, the pendulum swing toward purely experiential or emotive worship, while momentarily engaging, frequently lacks theological depth and historical continuity, leaving believers unmoored from the great narrative of redemption. Both polarities share a common flaw: they fundamentally overlook the communal and liturgical nature of biblical pedagogy, reducing education to an individual transaction between the teacher, the learner, and a text, while ignoring the ecclesial context in which faith is actually meant to be conceived, nurtured, and transmitted. Gross (2023) observes that "there is significant controversy about whether special religious education, that is in-faith education, still has a role within the post-modern world," suggesting that the very legitimacy of faith-based education is now an open question that demands urgent theological and pedagogical re-evaluation.

It is precisely at this impasse that the Old Testament, specifically the Mosaic legislation found in the Book of Deuteronomy, offers a startlingly prescient corrective. Far from being a collection of archaic rituals irrelevant to the digital age, the Deuteronomic code presents an integrated, holistic, and thoroughly community-based educational paradigm. The climactic mandate given in Deuteronomy 31:9-13—which commands the public, septennial reading of the Torah to the entire assembly of Israel—stands as the architectural masterpiece of this pedagogy. This pericope envisions a pedagogical event in which "men, women, children, and the foreigners residing in your towns" gather to "listen and learn to fear the LORD" (Deuteronomy 31:12-13, NIV). The central thesis of this article is that Deuteronomy 31:9-13 provides a normative and reconstructive model for faith education that directly addresses the three primary maladies of the postmodern condition: epistemological relativism, radical individualism, and ephemeral immediacy. Allen, Lawton, and Seibel (2023) have recently articulated what the Deuteronomic mandate anticipates by several millennia: "the process of becoming Christlike does not happen alone, and intergenerational faith communities are designed for Christian formation." Rather than abandoning the Old Testament as an antiquated precursor to the New, this study contends that

the contemporary church must recover the Deuteronomic imagination if it is to effectively form disciples capable of resisting cultural assimilation.

To substantiate this thesis, this article proceeds in four movements. First, it engages in a careful exegesis of Deuteronomy 31:9-13, examining the historical context, literary structure, and critical Hebrew terminology—*shema* (to hear), *lamad* (to learn), and *yare* (to fear)—that undergird the mandate. Second, it delineates the specific challenges of the postmodern era, mapping how they directly undermine the goals of faith transmission. Third, it reconstructs three theological pillars from the text—the *objective corpus*, the *inclusive assembly*, and the *cyclical rhythm*—and demonstrates how each functions as a deliberate antidote to its postmodern antithesis. Finally, the study concludes with a constructive, practical proposal for the contemporary church, suggesting tangible pathways to re-embed faith education within the liturgical life of the community. In doing so, this article aims to contribute to the growing corpus of practical theology that takes the Old Testament seriously as a resource for contemporary ecclesial renewal, inviting pastors, educators, and theologians to recover the ancient paths that lead to life—paths that run directly through the public, communal, and reverent hearing of the Word of God.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based research design with a descriptive-analytical approach, situated within the field of practical theology and theological interpretation of Scripture (Osmer, 2008; Swinton & Mowat, 2016). The methodological framework integrates three interrelated analytical procedures—biblical exegesis, contextual analysis, and theological reconstruction—that correspond to the four movements of the article. The primary source is the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Deuteronomy 31:9-13, examined through the historical-grammatical method (Kaiser & Silva, 2007; Osborne, 2006), with careful lexical analysis of the key Hebrew verbs *shema* (hear), *lamad* (learn), and *yare* (fear). Secondary sources encompass two bodies of literature: recent peer-reviewed scholarship on postmodern challenges to religious education and works on Christian education pedagogy and intergenerational discipleship (Allen, Lawton, & Seibel, 2023; Chrostowski, 2024; Gross, 2023; Mohajel & Asghari, 2023; Tulung et al., 2024). The analytical procedure unfolds in four sequential steps: exegesis of the pericope to establish its original meaning; a diagnostic mapping of the postmodern condition; a correlational analysis that juxtaposes the exegetical findings with contemporary challenges, following Osmer's (2008) normative and pragmatic tasks; and a constructive theological proposal that synthesizes these insights into a practical model for community-based faith education. The study acknowledges its limitation as a purely literature-based investigation, offering a theological and pedagogical framework that awaits empirical testing and contextual adaptation within specific ecclesial settings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Exegetical Analysis of Deuteronomy 31:9-13: The Anatomy of the Mandate

The pericope of Deuteronomy 31:9-13 occupies a pivotal position within the literary structure of the Book of Deuteronomy, functioning as the climactic culmination of Moses' covenantal instruction to Israel. Positioned immediately before the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) and the blessing of the tribes (Deuteronomy 33), this passage serves as the formal commissioning of the Torah as the constitutive document of Israel's identity. The narrative context is significant: Israel stands on the threshold of the Promised Land, facing the dual perils of military conquest and religious assimilation. Moses, aware that his death is imminent, establishes a mechanism for covenant renewal that transcends his own leadership, ensuring that the Word of God remains the enduring center of Israel's corporate life (Tigay, 1996; Wright, 2012). The mandate is therefore not an isolated liturgical instruction but a strategic intervention designed to preserve the theological identity of the nation across generations.

The command to "write this law" (Deuteronomy 31:9) and to "read it before all Israel" (v. 11) introduces a revolutionary pedagogical innovation: the codification and public recitation of divine

revelation as the foundation of communal identity. Christensen (2002) observes that this public reading transforms the Torah from a private possession of the priestly class into a public inheritance of the entire covenant community. The specific timing of the reading—"at the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of remission, at the Feast of Booths" (v. 10)—is theologically significant. The seven-year cycle corresponds to the sabbatical year, a period of debt cancellation and agrarian rest, symbolizing the radical dependence of Israel upon YHWH's provision. The Feast of Booths (Sukkot) commemorates the wilderness sojourn, reminding Israel that their identity is not rooted in the permanence of Canaanite settlement but in the transient, pilgrim existence under divine guidance. The mandate is thus embedded within the liturgical calendar, ensuring that education is not an occasional event but a recurring rhythm embedded in the annual cycle of worship.

The triadic verbal structure of the pericope—"hear" (*shema*), "learn" (*lamad*), and "fear" (*yare*)—articulates a comprehensive pedagogical sequence that moves from passive reception to active internalization to existential transformation. The first verb, *shema*, extends beyond mere auditory perception to encompass obedient response, as famously articulated in the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4. The gathered community is not merely to listen but to heed, positioning themselves under the authority of the divine Word. The second verb, *lamad*, denotes the cognitive appropriation of the law, the process of study and internalization that transforms the Torah from external text to internal disposition. The third verb, *yare*, represents the ultimate goal of the educational process: the cultivation of reverent awe, a disposition of heart that shapes the entirety of one's existence. Together, these three verbs constitute a holistic educational model that integrates hearing, understanding, and living—a model that resists the fragmentation of knowledge, affect, and behavior characteristic of modern educational approaches (Kaiser & Silva, 2007).

The inclusiveness of the audience designated in verse 12 is remarkable and theologically intentional: "men, women, children, and the foreigners who are in your towns." This enumeration deliberately transgresses the hierarchical boundaries of ancient Near Eastern society, where formal education was typically reserved for elite males. The inclusion of women and children in the public reading acknowledges their full membership in the covenant community and their right to direct access to the divine Word (Hoffman, 2008). The inclusion of "foreigners" (*ger*) is particularly striking, extending the covenantal privilege to non-Israelites residing within the land. This inclusionary logic anticipates the prophetic vision of Israel as a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6) and the New Testament expansion of the covenant to all peoples. The Deuteronomic mandate thus conceives of education not as a privilege for the few but as a right and responsibility of the entire community, establishing a model of radical inclusivity that challenges the exclusionary practices of both ancient and contemporary societies.

Finally, the explicit reference to "the children who do not know" (Deuteronomy 31:13) highlights the intergenerational dimension of the mandate, identifying the transmission of faith to the next generation as the primary impetus for the public reading. This verse articulates what will become a recurring concern throughout the Old Testament: the danger of "another generation" arising "who did not know the LORD" (Judges 2:10). The septennial reading is therefore a prophylactic against generational amnesia, ensuring that each new cohort is exposed to the formative narrative of Israel's redemption. This intergenerational intentionality presupposes that faith is not automatically inherited but must be deliberately transmitted through communal practices and shared memory. The Deuteronomic mandate thus anticipates contemporary research on intergenerational discipleship, which similarly emphasizes the necessity of intentional structures and practices to bridge the gap between generations (Allen, Lawton, & Seibel, 2023).

The Postmodern Condition and Its Challenges to Faith Education

The postmodern epistemological landscape, characterized by what Lyotard famously termed "incredulity toward metanarratives," presents a profound challenge to the enterprise of faith education. This incredulity is not merely intellectual skepticism but a comprehensive cultural disposition that

permeates all aspects of contemporary life, fundamentally altering how individuals perceive truth, authority, and identity. Mohajel and Asghari (2023) argue that postmodernism systematically undermines the ontological foundations of theology, replacing transcendent, absolute values with localized, context-oriented perspectives. This shift has profound implications for religious education: when truth is reduced to social construction and meaning is relegated to individual interpretation, the very possibility of transmitting a coherent, authoritative faith tradition becomes problematic. The vertical orientation of traditional education—the transmission of revealed truth from God to community to individual—is displaced by a horizontal orientation in which every perspective is deemed equally valid.

The first and perhaps most fundamental challenge of postmodernity is epistemological relativism—the denial of objective, universal truth in favor of perspectival, culturally situated knowledge. This relativism directly contradicts the foundational premise of Deuteronomic education, which presupposes the Torah as objective divine revelation that holds authority over the entire community regardless of individual preference or cultural context. When truth is viewed as socially constructed, the public reading of a canonical text as an authoritative word from God appears as an act of cultural imperialism rather than an act of grace. Smith (2023) observes that this relativism extends into the very fabric of educational theory, where even the concept of "knowledge" is contested and the possibility of justification is systematically undercut. The consequences for Christian education are severe: if the Scriptures are not objectively true and universally binding, their formative power over individuals and communities is fatally compromised.

The second challenge is the erosion of institutional and communal authority, a hallmark of what Zygmunt Bauman described as "liquid modernity," in which all structures of meaning and belonging become transient and subject to constant revision. In the postmodern milieu, inherited traditions, established institutions, and recognized authorities are met with suspicion rather than deference. The church, as an institution claiming divine authority and wielding formative power over its members, is particularly vulnerable to this suspicion. Chrostowski (2024) documents this phenomenon in the context of religious education in Europe, where declining institutional credibility has led to a significant "reinterpretation" of traditional religious education, making it increasingly difficult for ecclesiastical authorities to exercise their formative role in society. This erosion of authority undermines the foundational assumption of the Deuteronomic mandate, which presupposes that the community gathered around the Torah will submit to its authority and allow it to shape their identity.

The third challenge is the hyper-individualism and consumerist orientation that characterize postmodern subjectivity. In a culture that prizes personal autonomy and self-invention, individuals approach religious communities and practices as consumers selecting from an endless array of spiritual options. Faith becomes a lifestyle choice rather than a covenantal commitment, and education is reduced to providing satisfying experiences rather than forming disciples. This consumerist orientation fundamentally distorts the nature of community-based faith education, which presupposes submission to the Word and commitment to the community. Gross (2023) observes that this individualistic turn raises profound questions about whether "special religious education, that is in-faith education, still has a role within the post-modern world." The very legitimacy of faith-based education, predicated on the transmission of a tradition rather than the expression of individual preference, is now contested.

Finally, the fragmentation of time and the tyranny of immediacy in the digital age pose significant obstacles to the kind of education envisioned in Deuteronomy 31. The postmodern condition is characterized by the compression of time, the privileging of the present moment, and the rapid obsolescence of the past. This "presentism" undermines the pedagogical importance of memory, tradition, and historical consciousness. The Deuteronomic mandate, by contrast, presupposes the formative power of remembering God's past acts and transmitting that memory across generations. Ratzinger (2023) identified this loss of historical consciousness as a central feature of the contemporary educational crisis, arguing that the inability to transmit the memory of God's saving acts leads to

"spiritual regress and deformation." The septennial rhythm of the mandate constitutes a deliberate resistance to presentism, establishing a rhythm of remembrance that counteracts cultural amnesia.

Reconstructing Community-Based Faith Education: Three Deuteronomic Pillars

In response to the challenges of epistemological relativism, the first pillar of reconstruction is the recovery of the objective authority of the canonical corpus. The Deuteronomic mandate of public Torah reading reasserts the transcendent reality of divine revelation—not as an authoritarian imposition, but as a liberating act that offers a stable narrative center to a fragmented community. The reading of the Torah in the presence of the gathered assembly creates what will later be described as a *hermeneutical community*, a community that is formed by its interpretation of and submission to the authoritative text. In the postmodern context, this recovery of textual authority requires a careful retrieval of what will later be called the "theological interpretation of Scripture," in which the Bible is read not merely as an historical document but as a living Word that speaks authoritatively to the contemporary community. Gross (2023) suggests that the future of religious education lies precisely in such retrieval, in reconnecting contemporary believers with the textual traditions that have shaped the church through the centuries.

The second pillar, addressing the erosion of communal authority and the fragmentation of identity, is the reconstruction of the inclusive, intergenerational assembly (*qahal*) as the primary locus of faith formation. Deuteronomy 31:12's inclusion of "men, women, children, and the foreigners" challenges the contemporary church's demographic segregation, wherein age-specific programming often fragments the community and inhibits cross-generational discipleship. Allen, Lawton, and Seibel (2023) articulate the theological rationale for this recovery: "the process of becoming Christlike does not happen alone, and intergenerational faith communities are designed for Christian formation." The recovery of the multi-generational assembly as the context for scriptural reading and communal discernment re-establishes the church not as a collection of individual consumers but as a covenant community in which identity is bestowed corporately. This reconstruction requires intentional structural changes to dismantle age-segregated programming and foster organic mentorship across generations, creating spaces where the young learn from the old and the old are renewed by the faith of the young.

The third pillar, confronting the tyranny of immediacy and the fragmentation of time, is the reintegration of cyclical liturgical rhythm as a pedagogical tool for shaping identity. The septennial timing of the Deuteronomic reading grounds education in the liturgical calendar of creation and redemption, challenging the postmodern obsession with novelty, spontaneity, and immediate gratification. This cyclical pedagogy of repetition and remembrance roots identity in the historical acts of God and the practices of the covenant community. The reconstruction of a liturgical rhythm involves the intentional recovery of the Christian calendar—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—as an educational framework that teaches the narrative of salvation through embodied ritual and communal participation. Tulung et al. (2024) note that such liturgical practices have been increasingly recognized as forming a "crucial Christian educational strategy" for counteracting the dehumanizing effects of secular education, providing a necessary alternative to the commodification and fragmentation of modern life.

The integration of these three pillars—objective authority, inclusive assembly, and cyclical rhythm—yields a comprehensive model of community-based faith education that directly addresses the pathologies of postmodernity. This model entails, practically, the reclamation of the public reading of Scripture in corporate worship as a transformative event rather than merely a homiletical introduction. It involves the intentional gathering of the entire intergenerational community for hearing, learning, and fearing together, resisting the fragmentation of the congregation into age-specific silos. It necessitates the recovery of the Christian calendar as a pedagogical tool that rhythms the lives of believers according to the narrative of redemption. Mohajel and Asghari (2023) suggest that such retrieval of tradition, far from being a backward-looking nostalgia, constitutes a prophetic resistance to

the antirealist, relativist tendencies of postmodern culture, reaffirming "transcendental and absolute values" that have been systematically displaced.

In conclusion, the Deuteronomic mandate of Deuteronomy 31:9-13 offers not a retreat from the challenges of modernity but a constructive, counter-cultural pedagogical alternative that reframes education not primarily as content transfer but as covenantal formation. Chrostowski (2024) observes that the future of religious education depends upon "reinterpreting the educational process in light of the relationship between God and man," moving beyond both propositional apologetics and sentimental experience toward the authentic fear of the LORD. This is precisely what the Deuteronomic mandate accomplishes: it establishes a pedagogical model in which the gathered community, across generations, hears the divine Word, learns to live according to its demands, and cultivates the reverent awe that constitutes the essence of covenantal relationship. The reconstruction of community-based faith education in the postmodern era thus begins not with innovative educational techniques but with the recovery of the ancient practice of gathering, listening, learning, and fearing—together, before the living God.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Deuteronomy 31:9-13 provides a normative and reconstructive model for community-based faith education that directly addresses the three primary maladies of the postmodern condition: epistemological relativism, radical individualism, and ephemeral immediacy. Through a careful exegesis of the pericope, the study has identified the triadic pedagogical sequence of hearing (*shema*), learning (*lamad*), and fearing (*yare*) as the architectural blueprint for covenantal formation, emphasizing the public, communal, and intergenerational dimensions of faith transmission. The diagnosis of the postmodern landscape revealed the profound challenges confronting contemporary religious education: the denial of objective truth, the erosion of institutional and communal authority, the consumerist orientation of hyper-individualism, and the fragmentation of time through digital presentism. In response, the reconstruction of three Deuteronomic pillars—the objective authority of the canonical corpus, the inclusive intergenerational assembly, and the cyclical liturgical rhythm—offers a coherent theological counter-narrative that resists cultural assimilation and forms disciples capable of enduring faithfulness. The integration of these pillars into a practical ecclesial model entails the reclamation of public Scripture reading, the intentional gathering of multi-generational communities, and the recovery of the Christian calendar as a pedagogical tool for shaping identity and memory.

The implications of this study extend beyond the academy into the lived practice of congregations, pastors, educators, and families who bear the responsibility of transmitting faith to the next generation. The Deuteronomic mandate challenges the prevailing educational paradigms that reduce faith formation to content transfer or emotional experience, calling instead for a holistic, embodied, and communal pedagogy rooted in the liturgical rhythms of the covenant community. While the study acknowledges its limitation as a purely literature-based investigation, it offers a theological and pedagogical framework that invites empirical testing and contextual adaptation within diverse ecclesial settings. Future research may fruitfully explore the implementation of Deuteronomic principles in specific congregational contexts, examining how the recovery of public reading, intergenerational gathering, and liturgical rhythm shapes the faith formation of children, youth, and adults in the digital age. Ultimately, the recovery of Deuteronomy 31:9-13 is not an exercise in nostalgic antiquarianism but a prophetic retrieval of the ancient paths that lead to life—paths that run directly through the public, communal, and reverent hearing of the Word of God. In a culture that has lost its capacity to remember and transmit its most sacred traditions, the church is summoned once again to gather, to listen, to learn, and to fear—together, before the living God.

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