

# **Deuteronomy 4 and the Coercion of Israel**

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay continues my previous work on the Song of Moses (Deut 32) and its theology of the LORD's violence against disloyal Israel.<sup>1</sup> The work is motivated by the (post-)modern western rejection of the appropriateness of violence within interpersonal relationships and the resulting censure of the LORD's violence in the OT. Since the LORD's relationship with humanity is often portrayed in anthropomorphic metaphors, it is natural to judge the ethics of the LORD in terms of the corresponding human relationships.<sup>2</sup> Thus if the LORD is husband and Israel is wife and the LORD responds to Israel's adultery with blows, it is problematic for a reader who sees wife beating as categorically wrong.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rob Barrett, "The Song of Moses: Exploring the Lord's Wrath Against Disloyal Israel," n.p. cited Jun 30, 2005. Online: <http://coffeewithbarretts.com/writings/SongOfMoses.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Even if one accepts the necessity of humility before the LORD, as I do, this does not absolve anyone from the responsibility of judging the LORD's ethics. Though the critic may judge from a position of superiority over the portrayal of the LORD in the biblical text, the person of faith must also judge in order to honestly deal with any tensions with the text as well as for honesty in relationship with the LORD.

<sup>3</sup> Things are more complex when it is realized that the cultural grounding of the metaphorical interpersonal relationships has changed over time. It cannot be assumed that the husband-wife relationship envisioned by a modern western reader is essentially the same as the husband-wife relationship in the world of the ancient author. The gap is even more apparent when the monarch-subject or master-slave relationships are used to anchor the metaphor since such relationships are all but non-existent in the modern western world. Obviously there is also the problem that metaphorical language has its limits and cannot be pressed too far. However the biblical metaphors must be taken seriously as what they are.

This essay continues the examination of texts in the book of Deuteronomy that portray the LORD's violence against Israel, his own people. This book self-consciously provides a theology for Israel's relationship with the LORD. The subject of this essay is Moses' sermon in Deut 4:1-40 (hereafter, "the sermon").<sup>4</sup> This passage provides the hinge point between Moses' first and second discourse. It connects the historical retrospective of chs. 1-3 and the Decalogue in ch. 5. Situated between the rehearsal of Israel's past relationship with the LORD and the specifics of his commands is this exhortation to obey the LORD's commands, specifically the command that prohibits idolatry.

In this essay, I first examine the sermon in some depth, in terms of bounds, unity, structure, and context, through verse-by-verse exegesis, through expansion on how it handles the core themes of interest, and in comparison with the Song of Moses. I then reflect on the theology of coercion and its ethics in the context of the sermon.<sup>5</sup>

## DEUTERONOMY 4:1-40

### **Bounds, Unity, Structure and Context**

I first consider the bounds of the passage. The pivotal conjunction **וְהַעֲתָדָה** in 4:1 marks a decisive shift from the historical retrospective of chs. 1-3 to the hortatory sermon of ch. 4. The end of the passage is more difficult to determine. The sermon concludes at the end of 4:40 where the voice shifts from Moses to the narrator. Verses 41-43 have Moses establishing three cities of refuge beyond the Jordan. Verses 44-49 introduce Moses' second discourse, which runs through chs. 5-28. McConville connects the sermon and these two subsequent sections by noting that vv. 44-49 form an inclusio with 1:1-5, and together with vv. 41-43 serve "to set the preaching in its historical context."<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann calls vv. 41-43 "a curious addendum to the long speech. It is not at all evident why this reference to cities of refuge should occur here."<sup>7</sup> I agree with Brueggemann, though it may be that this act of governance over the land beyond the Jordan provides some closure to that phase of the conquest before crossing into Canaan. With the start of Moses' second discourse, references to Sihon and Og disappear (to resurface in the third discourse, cf. 29:7; 31:4) and eyes turn toward life in the land on the other side. And while McConville is correct that vv. 44-49 are similar to 1:1-5, it is more as a parallel

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<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I discuss the passage within the world of the text, i.e. with Moses speaking the sermon to the second generation after the exodus from Egypt as they prepare for the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. Regardless of one's position on the historicity of these events, and regardless of the time of the text's composition (whether by Moses, in the time of Josiah, or during or after the exile), the canonical text seeks to explain the continuing implications for future generations of Israel of her relationship with the LORD. The text functions through the reader's imaginative submersion into the scene on the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan (1:3). It is through such attention to the portrayal of Moses' discourses that the relationship between the LORD and his people is to be understood and proper response made.

<sup>5</sup> While I previously focused more on violence than coercion as the core of the ethical quandary presented by these passages, it is becoming clearer to me that the problem is more that the LORD coerces—through the threat and reality of violence—than the mere fact that the LORD acts with violence.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 114, 100-2.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 59.

introduction for the second discourse than as closure to the first. This is especially true with the new focus on “the decrees and the statutes and ordinances” (4:44) that dominate chs. 5-28. Since vv. 41-43 seem to belong to the larger context of chs. 1-4 and vv. 44-49 introduce the discourse of chs. 5-28, it is reasonable to consider the sermon 4:1-40 as a unit for study.

Given these bounds, the question remains whether it possesses literary unity. Opinions vary considerably on this matter. Noth identified “Deut 1-3(4)” as the introduction to the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH; Deut-Kings) rather than integral to the book of Deuteronomy. His notation separates off ch. 4 as “a special case.”<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of the chapter, he argues that it lacks inner unity and reconstructs the original text as vv. 1-2, 5-8, 10-14, 22-23a, 25-28.<sup>9</sup> Von Rad likewise opines that “the contents do not make a perfect whole, for the admonitions proceed oddly along a double track.”<sup>10</sup> One track is the comprehensive law given at Horeb<sup>11</sup> and the other is the specific prohibition of idols. Another persistent challenge for commentators on Deuteronomy in general and the sermon in particular is the *Numeruswechsel*—the change between singular and plural second person addresses. Source critics use this feature extensively as a clue to teasing apart the layers behind the text. Mayes, following Braulik and (to some degree) Lohfink, argues persuasively that the unifying features of the sermon outweigh the curious *Numeruswechsel*.<sup>12</sup> Mayes argues that “the change of address has a clear emphatic function and cannot possibly be used to weaken the strong case which can be made for unity of authorship in 4:1-40.”<sup>13</sup> While emphatic function is difficult to demonstrate to skeptics, it is true that the unity of the sermon supersedes any concern over the *Numeruswechsel*.

And what is the basis for taking the sermon as a unity? As Mayes summarizes Braulik, there is a unity of language, form and content. The most persuasive elements are the form and content. In form, the sermon breaks down into six sections (vv. 1-4, 5-8, 9-14, 15-22, 23-31, 32-40). Each section has its own coherence and each contains an opening admonition to heed the law and a reference to history<sup>14</sup>—though the last section ends with the call for obedience, establishing closure. At a higher level, the sermon can be structured as an introduction (vv. 1-8), a central teaching (vv. 9-31) and a conclusion (vv. 32-40). The two subsections of the introduction are unified by the imperatives “hear”

<sup>8</sup> Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 33-4.

<sup>10</sup> He goes as far as to assert, “This cannot be the original form,” citing the “clear break” between vv. 14 and 15 (Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* [trans. Dorothea Barton; London: SCM Press, 1966], 49).

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy consistently refers to Sinai as Horeb except for two instances in Moses’ blessing (33:2, 16).

<sup>12</sup> A. D. H. Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy,” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy* (ed. Duane L. Christensen; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 197-202. Cf. Georg Braulik, *Die Mittel deuteronomischer Rhetorik: Erhoben aus Deuteronomium 4,1-40* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978); Norbert Lohfink, *Höre Israel. Auslegung von Texten aus dem Buch Deuteronomium* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1965), 91-6.

<sup>13</sup> Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4,” 201. McConville concurs but believes some changes are simply a matter of style: the number changes “tend, moreover, to occur at the beginning and end of lines, possibly therefore serving a rhetorical purpose; at other times they simply reflect a tendency to mobility in style” (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 101).

<sup>14</sup> Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4,” 197; cites Braulik, *Die Mittel deuteronomischer Rhetorik*, 7-81.

(v. 1) and “see” (v. 5). The central teaching is unified by each subsection opening with the verb “be careful” (**שְׁמַר**) with various forms of **לֹךְ** and **לֹנֶפֶשְׁךָ** (“for yourself,” “for your soul”). Further, each warning contains one or more “lest” (**גַּם**) clauses that trace out the results of failing to be careful.<sup>15</sup>

As to the unity of the sermon’s content, I offer my exegesis below as an extended argument for its coherence. While von Rad may see the themes of obedience to the law and avoiding idols as two separate tracks, I argue that the sermon’s focus on idolatry as a violation of exclusive loyalty to the LORD is foundational to Israel’s life with the LORD under the whole law. This justifies the sermon’s preoccupation with idolatry.

If the sermon is a unified text, then how does it connect with its context? While it formally belongs to Moses’ first discourse, it prepares for the second by connecting Israel’s history with the LORD to the actual commandments of the Decalogue. The sermon draws together several threads from the previous chapters. Moses has rehearsed Israel’s victory over the trans-Jordan kings Og and Sihon, and the settling of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh in their land. He has reminded them of his words to Joshua to trust the LORD for similar victories in Canaan itself. And finally he has told the story of the LORD’s unyielding decision that he himself will not enter the land. Moses then pauses with the people at rest at Beth-peor. He is preparing to declare to Israel the Decalogue the LORD gave them at Sinai (ch. 5), but before he does so he presents the sermon of ch. 4. The punishment of the people’s idolatry at Beth-peor (cf. Num 25) and Moses’ inability to enter the land and will both illustrate the cost of disobedience to the LORD’s commands (4:3-4, 21-24). The dispossession of the Canaanites and possession of their lands is a perilous but assumed part of the story of ch. 4 (4:1, 5, 14, 22, 26, 38). The Sinai theophany, which will lead to the Decalogue of ch. 5, is at the center of the sermon that explains the error of idolatry based on the imageless speech of the LORD at the mountain (4:10-18).<sup>16</sup> Thus the passage is at least loosely connected to its context.

### Exegesis

I now proceed to an exegesis of the sermon, organized by the structure presented above: introduction (vv. 1-8), central teaching (vv. 9-31), and conclusion (vv. 32-40).

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<sup>15</sup> Braulik, *Die Mittel deuteronomischer Rhetorik*, 82-3; cited by Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Paul Mohr Verlag, 2003), 175.

<sup>16</sup> Mayes points out that chs. 1-3 do not rehearse the key historical moments that drive the sermon (the theophany at Horeb, the exodus, and the details of the betrayal at Beth-peor) and that the transition to 4:1 is too abrupt to be original (Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4,” 204). While his observations are well taken, the connections between the sermon and its context are strong enough to read the canonical text coherently, which is the goal of this essay. The strong transition that occurs at 4:1 does not preclude such reading.

### Introduction: verses 1-8

The two main themes of the sermon are introduced in the first eight verses: the necessity of Israel heeding the commands of the LORD (vv. 1-4) and the uniqueness across all nations of Israel's relationship with the LORD (vv. 5-8).

Verses 1-4 summarize the relational dynamics between Israel and the LORD in three steps. First, the LORD gives commandments through Moses to Israel. Second, obedience leads to life in entering and possessing the land. Third, disobedience leads to destruction. As occurs throughout Deuteronomy, there are two-sides to Israel's life in the land: it is the LORD's free gift ("the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you" [v. 1]<sup>17</sup>) and yet its initial and continuing possession depends upon Israel's obedience ("give heed to the statutes and ordinances...so that you may live to enter and occupy the land"). Moses makes no general statement about the consequences for disobedience, but instead offers the example of Beth-peor. As offenders were destroyed there and the obedient were kept alive, so it shall continue to be. Though any sort of deviation from the commandments is culpable (v. 2), the illustration of Beth-peor highlights disloyalty to the LORD and following Baal (or other gods in general) as the primal disobedience. He offers no moral justification for the LORD's right to command Israel. Neither does he justify the LORD's destruction of the disloyal. These are simply the terms of the relationship between Israel and the LORD—there are no alternatives.

In vv. 5-8 Moses glorifies the LORD's commandments that he teaches Israel.<sup>18</sup> This is no oppressive burden that is placed upon her,<sup>19</sup> but rather the LORD's words are the enlightenment of her thinking and her guide for living well. So unique are Israel's laws, that the nations will exclaim, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" (v. 6). Moses here introduces the theme of the nations (**גַּם**: vv. 6, 7, 8; **כָּל**: v. 6), who play an important role throughout the sermon (**גַּם**: vv. 27, 34, 38; **כָּל**: vv. 19, 27, 33; Egypt: v. 20, 34, 37). Israel is unlike any other nation, yet not because of herself but because of her synergy with the LORD (cf. 7:7-8). The surrounding nations will remark on Israel's visible wisdom—a universal quality<sup>20</sup>—but Moses' rhetorical questions probe deeper: Israel is unique because of the nearness of the LORD and the righteousness of the laws he has given her. In the

<sup>17</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

<sup>18</sup> The verb "teach" is in the suffix conjugation, usually meaning a past event. Von Rad suggests that Moses is referring to a previous recounting of the law (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 49), which is how KJV, NASB, NASB and JPS render it. McConville argues that this goes against context, which it does, and interprets it as expressing the urgency of present decision (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 104), which agrees with the NRSV translation ("I now teach you"). Weinfeld appears to agree with McConville, as cited by Tigay (Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy : The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996-06-01], 44).

<sup>19</sup> In deference to English convention I use the feminine singular pronoun to refer to Israel, despite the Hebrew convention of using the masculine singular and plural.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann helpfully points out, "The celebration of Israel is not for some narrow, ghettoized religious passion, but for effectiveness by the norms of the nations" (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 52). Israel will be a wonder not so much because of a peculiar set of values but because of her success according to the nations' values.

nations' eyes, Israel is special, but Israel knows that she is special because of her living relationship with the LORD.

These two introductory themes of the sermon—the necessity of obedience and the unique relationship with the LORD—cannot be separated. It is only through this relationship that Israel has the opportunity—and responsibility—to obey and disobedience is tantamount to Israel seeking dissolution of the relationship.

#### Central Teaching: verses 9-31

The central teaching of the sermon is contained in vv. 9-31. As mentioned above, Braulik's study revealed three formal sections that are marked by the admonition to "take care" (**שְׁמֹר**) of "yourselves" (**לְכֶם** or **לְךָ**) or "your souls" (**נַפְשֶׁךָ** or **נַפְשֵׁיכֶם**), with a warning of what carelessness may produce, marked by "lest" (**אָבֹת**). Verses 9-14 advise the Israelites to take care for themselves and their descendants so that they do not forget what happened at Horeb. Verses 15-22 contemporize the imageless theophany at Horeb as a prohibition against serving images. Verses 23-31 expand on the destruction that will result if Israel corrupts herself with images.

In the first section (vv. 9-14), Moses warns Israel to take care lest she forget what she has seen. The memory of the theophany at Horeb is to remain within her heart and to be implanted into the heart of each succeeding generation.<sup>21</sup> They are to remember how Moses was told to gather the nation before the LORD so that they could learn to fear the LORD for all generations (cf. Exod 20:20). But what is this fear of the LORD that they are to learn? It is not an emotion of terror or the dread of offending him, rather to fear the LORD is to obey him.<sup>22</sup> Though the mountain experience of burning fire and dark cloud was indeed awesome and frightening, its grandeur was principally in the words the LORD spoke (v. 12): "He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments" (v. 13). And beyond these fundamental laws, "the LORD charged me [Moses] at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land" (v. 14). Moberly points to Gen 22 as "the primary canonical exposition of the meaning of 'one who fears God.'"<sup>23</sup> In it he observes that "Abraham's willingness to relinquish Isaac resonates particularly with the first two commandments, the prohibition of other gods and their images, when these are understood (as Israel came to understand them, whether or not they originally had this significance) as requiring Israel to

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<sup>21</sup> Moses emphasizes that his audience stood before the LORD at Horeb in v. 10, even though it was actually their parents' generation (cf. 5:3-4). Despite the drama of Horeb, it is the words communicated then and through Moses that are foundational, not the experience itself. This generation is already once removed from it, so they understand the conveyance of the memory to succeeding generations.

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), 373; cited by R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 82-3.

<sup>23</sup> Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 80.

renounce anything which posed a threat to undivided loyalty to the one God.”<sup>24</sup> Israel is to remember what she saw at Horeb—or rather what she did *not* see—and what she heard there: the words of the LORD (“Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice” [v. 12]). These words are her life as it is intertwined with him.

As introduced by Moses’ reminder that Israel saw no form at Horeb, the second section (vv. 15-22) expands on the continuing implications of Israel’s relationship with this formless LORD. Israel has been warned to take care lest she forget her encounter with the LORD at Horeb. Now she is warned to take care lest (**וְ**) she “act corruptly by making an idol” for herself (v. 16) and lest (**וְ**) she look up to heaven, see the sun, moon, and stars, and be led astray, bow down to them and serve them (v. 19). Pagan idol worship is markedly foreign to the modern western world. Why does the LORD focus so much on bowing down before statues of bulls and depictions of the sun instead of helping solve the real problems of the world? The problem with idolatry is that it threatens the unique and exclusive relationship between Israel and the LORD.<sup>25</sup> Serving an image means being disloyal to the LORD, communicating a desire for escape from the relationship the LORD has established. Moses dismisses for Israel the worship of images of created things “that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven” (v. 19). These things are for the gentiles, not for Israel—a striking statement of non-universalistic Yahwism. Of all the nations, Israel is the one and only for the LORD and therefore the LORD is the one and only for Israel.<sup>26</sup>

However, even though Israel and the LORD are presented synergistically here, it is by no means a relationship of equals. The LORD holds all of the power, as demonstrated by his rescue of the powerless Israelites from Egypt. In so taking her, Israel now belongs to him and has become his own possession or inheritance (v. 20: **וְאַתֶּם לֹא תִּקְחָה יְהוָה...לְהִיּוֹת לְעַם נְחַלָּה**). Israel has her inheritance in the good land of Canaan; the LORD has his inheritance in Israel.<sup>27</sup> The section closes with Moses’ sober reminder that Israel’s former disobedience has led to him losing his inheritance (“I am going to die in this land without crossing over the Jordan” [v. 22]). If Israel replaces the LORD with an idol, robbing him of his inheritance, her own inheritance will be lost as surely as Moses’ was, which brings us to the third section.

The third section (vv. 23-31) plays out the scenario that will result if Israel fails to take care. She has been warned to take care lest she forget. She has been warned to take care lest she worship an

<sup>24</sup> Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> The ideas behind idolatry and its threat to Israel’s relationship with the LORD are discussed at more length below.

<sup>26</sup> This exclusiveness of relationship between the LORD and Israel is foundational. MacDonald effectively argues that the concept of monotheism in Deuteronomy is not so much an ontological argument for the non-existence of other gods as an existential statement of how Israel relates to the LORD (MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and Monotheism*).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the language of “treasured possession” (**סְגִילָה**) in 7:6; 14:2; 26:18 and Exod 19:5. In each of these places, Israel is explicitly described in contradistinction to the other peoples of the world.

idol in place of the LORD. She is now warned of what will happen if she proves disloyal: the awe-inspiring fire of the LORD at Horeb will become the devouring fire of her God's jealousy (v. 24). The rhetoric moves to the distant future ("when you have had children and children's children") when the memory of the rescue from Egypt and the demand for exclusive worship has faded ("and become complacent [לֹשֶׁן: lit. to fall asleep or grow old] in the land") and the risk runs high that she will turn to some idol in place of the LORD (v. 25).<sup>28</sup> The verb for Israel's idolatry is שְׁחַת (Hiphil), which has the sense of spoiling or perverting. If Israel turns to idolatry, she is ruining herself by destroying her identity as the LORD's people. If she fails to take care, she will do what is formulaic for the Deuteronomistic literature, with its formulaic result: "doing what is evil (עָשָׂה) in the sight of the LORD your God, and provoking him to anger (כִּעֲבֹד, Hiphil)" (v. 25).<sup>29</sup> The grammar does not insist that this is the inevitable course of events; it only plays out a possible scenario. However, the less conditional v. 30 and the detailed back-and-forth of disloyalty, anger, punishment and repentance gives the passage a certain confidence that this future is highly probable.

What is Israel's fate to be if she is disloyal? She will be quickly and utterly destroyed (**אָבֵד** וַיַּהֲפִיךְ יְהוָה אֲתֶכְם בָּעָמִים) and exiled (**הָשִׁמְדָה תָּשִׁמְדוּן** and **הָאָבִידָה מֵהָר מֵעַל חָרֶץ**: lit. "the LORD will scatter you among the peoples") (vv. 26-27).<sup>30</sup> The giant nation of Israel will be reduced to a few (v. 27). Both the Abrahamic covenant gifts of seed and land will be reversed (cf. Gen 15:5, 7). Israel's disloyalty is tantamount to stealing the LORD's inheritance, so he will likewise take hers away. Moses solemnizes this prophecy by calling heaven and earth to be witnesses to it (v. 26).<sup>31</sup> In a move of in-kind punishment for idolatry, the survivors will suffer the indignity of serving lifeless non-gods, products of their captors' hands ("You will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell" [v. 28]). If Israel wants out of her relationship with the LORD along with its obligations and benefits, she can experience the distress of life without him, but only for a time. Israel's violation of the exclusive relationship with the LORD will damage that relationship almost—but not completely—beyond salvage.

In a surprising reversal, Israel finds restoration when everything has been apparently lost. Maintaining the ever-present tension of free gift and conditionality, Moses affirms that Israel will seek and find the LORD again, if she does so with her entire heart and soul (v. 29).<sup>32</sup> Then without

<sup>28</sup> N.B. that "you" can refer to the parents of the audience in v. 10 and the far off descendants of the audience in v. 25. All generations of Israel are collapsed in the logic of the sermon, which directs its message to Israel across time.

<sup>29</sup> The same formula is used to introduce the prophetic Song of Moses (31:29). At the close of DtrH it is used to explain the destruction of both the northern (2 Kgs 17:17-18) and southern (2 Kgs 21:14-15) kingdoms.

<sup>30</sup> Though the promise is that Israel's destruction will come quickly, in fact the history plays out very slowly and painfully as the kingdoms of Israel wander off into disloyalty (cf. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 109-10).

<sup>31</sup> N.B. that the LORD summons the same universal witnesses to hear the Song of Moses (31:28).

<sup>32</sup> The three waw-consecutive imperfects (**וְנִמְצָאת**, **וְבָקַשְׁתָּה**, and **וְלֹשֶׁן**) in vv. 29-30 can be understood in a number of different ways other than an assured statement of future events. Other possibilities include potential ("you might"), permissive ("you may"), desiderative ("you will want to"), obligative ("you ought to"), or

reservation, he prophesies that she will return to the LORD her God, and most importantly, she will then heed him (**וְשָׁמַעַת בְּקֹלְךָ**: lit. “listen to his voice”). But this change in Israel pivots on her destruction, her exile, her reduction to a remnant, and her worship of non-gods. It only happens “in your distress, when all these things have happened to you” (v.30). For disloyal Israel, loyalty only appears after divinely appointed suffering.

The central teaching of the sermon closes with an explanation for Israel’s restoration, based on a statement of the LORD’s character and commitment: “Because the LORD your God is a merciful (**רַחֲםִים**) God, he will neither abandon you (**רְפָהָה**, Hiphil: lit. “let drop”) nor destroy you (**תַּחַשׁ**, Hiphil); he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (v. 31). The creedal tone recalls the axiomatic Exod 34:6-7, but here in Israel’s story the existential implications of the LORD’s penchant for forgiveness and refusal to leave the guilty unpunished become clear. There is no tension between the promise to destroy Israel in v. 26 (**תַּבְּנֵן** and **שְׁמַד**) and the promise to not destroy her in v. 31 (**תַּחַשׁ**). In Deuteronomy the former terms are used for devastation and suffering, the latter for becoming corrupt. In particular, interpersonal uses of **תַּחַשׁ** point to the dissolution of the exclusive relationship between Israel and the LORD, either through Israel’s idolatry (4:16, 25; 9:12; 31:29; 32:5) or the LORD terminating the covenant (9:26; 10:10).<sup>33</sup> It is this final dissolution that the LORD is unwilling to initiate or allow (cf. 10:10), though ugly suffering is a tool he is willing—and likely—to use.

#### Conclusion: verses 32-40

The conclusion of the sermon (vv. 32-40) draws together again the two themes of obedience and uniqueness. The conclusion can be divided into three sections: rhetorical questions about uniqueness (vv. 32-34), the privilege and purpose of Israel (vv. 35-38), and an exhortation to respond properly (vv. 39-40).

In the first section (vv. 32-34), before asking his rhetorical questions, Moses broadens his canvas to encompass all time and all space. His questions about the uniqueness of what Israel has experienced are open to challenge from anything anyone has experienced from the day of creation until the present day, from one end of heaven to another. He asks, “Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of?” (v. 32). One can imagine the people of the audience, focused like most people on the mundane struggles of family life and basic needs of life, asking what

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injunctive (“you must”) (Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976], §169-173). Taken together, the most compelling sense is that v. 29 stipulates a condition on Israel that she search after the LORD wholly. But once that non-trivial condition is accomplished her return to the LORD will either be a natural result or will be permitted by him. Verse 30 has no condition, so seems more predictive that Israel actually will return to the LORD. But the OT demonstrates that some degree of contingency is always present when events depend upon human wholeheartedness.

<sup>33</sup> Two other occurrences in the Deuteronomic law code concern the ruining of trees during a siege (20:19, 20).

exactly has been so great about these years of drudgery. So Moses specifies exactly what has been so special by focusing his questions around Horeb and the exodus: “Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?” (vv. 33-34). Importantly, it is not just that the LORD is ontologically unique (though he certainly is, as displayed by his power in the exodus), but it is the connection between Israel and the LORD that is without comparison. The LORD has spoken his way of life for Israel to her. The LORD has taken Israel for his own out of Egypt—something no other god has even attempted. These foundational acts of relationship are not at all universal. The LORD did not speak to all nations, nor did he even commission Israel to convey his words to others. His word from the fiery mountain is for Israel alone.<sup>34</sup> The LORD did not rescue all people—as if it were even possible to take all people from the midst of other people!—but he took Israel from Egypt. The LORD does not call all humanity his people, but Israel alone is his special possession. But why has he done this?

The second section (vv. 35-38) focuses on Israel with the emphatically fronted יְהֹוָה. This section contains a number of infinitive constructs of purpose, which explain the divine will and bridge between the facts of his deeds and the call for response that follows in the next section. “To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him” (v. 35). Israel has seen (and heard) these things so that she will know the uniqueness of the LORD. As MacDonald writes, “Like the *Shema*, the statements in 4.35, 39; 7.9; 10.17; 32.39 are not ontological statements about YHWH. Instead, what they say about him is that he is an electing god, characterized by faithfulness, jealousy and mercifulness. For Israel, then, he is a god like no other, and indeed his actions for Israel show that he is ‘god of the gods.’”<sup>35</sup> The LORD’s purpose is to stamp this relationship onto Israel’s collective heart. “From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you” (v. 36). Reverberating behind this statement is the warning that the harsher discipline of a consuming fire (v. 36b) may be unleashed if Israel shrugs off her bond with the LORD (vv. 25-31). The choosing of Abraham’s descendants is not connected to a purpose clause but a causal וְ: “And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them” (v. 37). This connection between love and choosing is repeated in Deuteronomy (7:6-8; 10:14-15; 14:1-2),<sup>36</sup> with the focus here being that the LORD’s commitment to Israel follows from their heritage. This means that they can take no pride in themselves for being the LORD’s choice (cf. 7:7-8), but it also means that the LORD’s commitment to

<sup>34</sup> Although v. 6 shows the nations amazed by Israel’s wisdom through her laws, the LORD himself is presented as for Israel alone in this passage.

<sup>35</sup> MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and Monotheism*, 180.

<sup>36</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 56, n. 103.

them is based on something more than their good behavior (cf. v. 31). Moses then reiterates the purpose behind Israel's rescue from Egypt: to dispossess the nations more powerful than Israel, to bring Israel in, and to give her the land as an inheritance.<sup>37,38</sup> As Israel listens on the edge of the land, it is clear that the LORD's purpose for her is to dwell there, to gain her inheritance, but this destiny is contingent on her obedience (cf. v. 26), her willingness to live as the LORD's inheritance (cf. v. 20).

The sermon closes with a summary appeal for its two main themes: uniqueness and obedience (vv. 39-40). The LORD's purpose is for Israel to confess his—and consequently, her—uniqueness (v.35) and the purpose is now transformed into imperative: "So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on earth beneath; there is no other" (v. 39). This acknowledgment leads to the necessity of obedience—especially the obedience of loyalty—with good life in the good land at stake: "Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time" (v. 40).

### **Handling of Core Themes**

It is commonly noted that Deuteronomy's structure resembles that of ANE covenant treaties.<sup>39</sup> The number and naming of the features varies somewhat, but the basic idea is a document that presents the terms of the relationship as recounted by the powerful partner to the weaker partner (i.e. suzerain to vassal). Features include a recounting of the history of their relationship (including the suzerain's prior good actions toward the vassal), commands the vassal must obey, and future-looking statements of what will result from the vassal's compliance or rebellion. The passage under consideration is concerned with these same issues,<sup>40</sup> so in this section I examine the way these covenant themes are handled in Deut 4. Specifically, I examine the historical review of the LORD's election of Israel and prior kindness to her. I then look at how the LORD's commands are presented. Finally, I look at the future-looking ideas of Israel's disobedience, the LORD's consequent anger, and the possibility of reconciliation between them.

<sup>37</sup> The NRSV translates the first and third clauses as participles rather than infinitives, which loses the purpose sense of the Hebrew infinitive construct. The KJV, NIV and JPS translate all three as infinitives.

<sup>38</sup> Von Rad claims to see an editor's inconsistency in v. 38: "The preacher has forgotten the fiction of Moses' speech before the conquest" (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 51). However with the phrase "as it is today" (NRSV oddly adds the word "still") there is no reason to think that anything other than the trans-Jordan conquest is in view. The defeats of Og and Sihon are the foretaste of the fuller conquest (cf. 3:21-22) and part of the powerful rhetoric of the sermon. Of course, later readers automatically add the conquest of Canaan itself to Moses' words, making the sermon even more persuasive for the continuing necessity of remaining loyal to the LORD.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). Most commentators agree with the basic idea, though differing on whether this is the best way to understand the structure or genre of Deuteronomy (e.g., Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 97-9; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 23-4; Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 17).

<sup>40</sup> E.g. Mayes sees a pattern typical of such treaties in 4:9-31, but cautions that it is a result of the author's way of thinking rather than a conscious and deliberate formulation (Mayes, "Deuteronomy 4," 198).

### The LORD's Election of Israel and Kindness to Her

The history of the relationship between the LORD and Israel has a starting point in election, the LORD's choosing of Israel. The actual word (**נָסֹב**) is used in v. 37 as a consequence of the LORD's love for Israel's ancestors, which points back to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.<sup>41</sup> No other reason for the LORD's choice is given except for this love. But prior to this was the LORD's allotment of the host of heaven to the gentile nations to worship (v. 19). This would seem to point back to the very birth of nations after Babel<sup>42</sup> or even farther back into the primordial past. The LORD took Israel alone to be his allotment (v. 20). But at this point the chronology of election is telescoped because Israel's election is not presented as primordial but consummated in the exodus (vv. 20, 37) and the conquest (v. 38). It is only in contrast to the other nations that Israel's election as a nation is made clear: her extraction from the nation of Egypt and her dispossession of the nations of the land. It is the exodus and conquest that establish Israel's election.

The LORD's tangible kindness to chosen Israel has been demonstrated in a variety of ways. She was brought out of another nation—something no other god has even attempted (v. 34). She was brought to Horeb and witnessed the LORD's fire and voice—and lived (v. 33). She was given righteous laws that endow her with notable wisdom and discernment (v. 6). She has dispossessed the trans-Jordan kings and will soon take Canaan (vv. 22, 38). But most importantly in all of this, she has been given a unique intimacy with the LORD, who is near when she calls (v. 7).

Israel's relationship with the LORD is consistently presented as coming from the LORD, not Israel. It is decidedly asymmetric. He has loved, he has chosen, he has taken for his own, he has brought out, he has dispossessed other nations, and he will not abandon. He is not portrayed as asking Israel's permission, negotiating terms, or offering an exit option. He is powerful; she is powerless. He is subject; she is object.

Is the LORD a benevolent power for Israel? Moses' sermon does not affirm this because the LORD is not *for* Israel. But neither is he only for himself. He is for the synergy of himself and Israel. He is committed, even sworn (v. 31) to making his relationship with Israel what he wants it to be. This is neither regard for self nor disregard of Israel alone, but regard for his choice to be in covenant with her. Benevolence would mean always being kind to Israel, but kindness in an ordinary sense would not be the best way to describe the bloodshed at Beth-peor (v. 3), the blocking of Moses from the land (vv. 21-22), or the promised exile and destruction that will result from disobedience (vv. 26-28). Israel's election and the LORD's kindness to her are for *them*, not him or her alone.

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<sup>41</sup> Reference to Israel's relationship to the LORD extending back to the patriarchs is also noted in v. 1 ("the LORD, the God of your ancestors") and v. 31 ("He will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them").

<sup>42</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 435-6.

### The LORD's Commands

Obedience to the LORD's commands is the *sine qua non* for life in the land (vv. 1, 40). His commands are imposed unilaterally<sup>43</sup> upon Israel and are not open for human adjustment (v. 2). The commands are mediated to Israel by Moses who carries full authority for expressing the LORD's word (vv. 5, 14). Disobedience brings destruction (vv. 3, 25-26), which ultimately takes the form of exile from the land (v. 27). But destruction will not be the end of Israel, for the distress that she experiences in this destruction will cause her to seek after the LORD and return to him (vv. 29-30).<sup>44</sup> Her restoration is not to be understood as acquiescence by the LORD to Israel's rebellion, but is contingent on Israel's renewed obedience to his commands ("You will return to the LORD your God and heed him" [v. 30]).

The content of the LORD's commands is not arbitrary, but objectively praiseworthy, for the nations will notice Israel's life of observance and remark, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" (v. 6). Israel will reflect on these commands and call them just (v. 8). The only command that is explicitly named in the passage is the prohibition of idolatry (vv. 15-19).<sup>45</sup> Why is the shunning of idols the foundation stone for Israel's life? The text contrasts idol worship with the LORD's purpose in the exodus: for Israel "to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now" (v. 20). Idolatry is not just an infraction of a piece of a law code, but is a rejection of the synergy of Israel and the LORD. It is not a general rejection of him as a god, but a specific rejection of his relational purpose for Israel as her god. To embrace an idol is to reject the gifts of the exodus, Horeb and the land. The LORD demands that Israel be *his* people and no one else's.

### Israel's Disloyalty and the LORD's Anger

Israel's disloyalty is not a *fait accompli* here. It is a possibility, maybe even a probability, but not a necessity. The sermon has the same mode of disloyalty in mind as has just been highlighted in the LORD's commands: idolatry (v. 25). This is the cardinal sin for the DtrH, where it is cited as a major reason for the downfalls of both the northern (2 Kgs 17:12) and southern (2 Kgs 21:11-15) kingdoms. The sermon does not elaborate on the details of the idol; any form will suffice (v. 25).

The consequences of idolatry are dire yet not utter. In the LORD's provoked anger, he will remove the blessing of the land and drastically reduce Israel's population. He will scatter her among the nations (vv. 26-27) where they can pursue idolatry to their hearts' content (v. 28). But how different this is from the LORD giving up and letting them have their way. Israel is not at all granted autonomy; she is not free to choose idols for herself and forget the LORD. She is not free to choose life apart from the LORD. So Israel is denied autonomy and yet she is also denied annihilation. The LORD's

<sup>43</sup> Other texts (e.g., Exod 19:7-8; 24:3-8) put more emphasis on Israel's acceptance of the LORD's commands, but this is not a feature of Deut 4.

<sup>44</sup> The text does not resolve the tension between the utter destruction in death of the individuals who followed the Baal of Peor (v. 3) and the promise of restoration for Israel after her corporate destruction (v. 30).

<sup>45</sup> The ten commandments are cited but not listed (v. 13).

unapologetic anger brings her to the point of losing all of the marks of her nationhood, but she does not lose her relationship with the LORD. He will not erase their continuing history together.

### Reconciliation between the LORD and Israel

The LORD does not destroy Israel, but he brings her to a point of distress (**נַזֵּן**, v. 30), a point where a change can happen. In this hypothetical future when Israel has rebelled and suffered for it, “when all these things have happened to you in time to come” (v. 30), Moses’ prophetic words predict that Israel will then return (**שׁוֹבֵב**) to the LORD (though always with some contingency [cf. n. 32]). The path to reconciliation goes through distress. The emphasis of the reconciliation is on the change in Israel: “you will...heed him” (v. 30). The LORD is represented as a constant and contrasts with Israel’s disloyalty and return. No statement is made about the LORD restoring Israel to the land, re-establishing the covenant, or rebuilding her devastated population. This is not because such restoration is not in view, but because there is no question that such will happen upon Israel’s return to the LORD. “The LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (v. 31). He has remained fixed on his commitment to his relationship with Israel. Thus her return is the critical need. To dwell on her restored fortunes would be anti-climactic.

### Comparison with the Song of Moses (Deut 32)

How does the theology of relationship between Israel and the LORD in Deut 4 compare with that of the Song of Moses (Deut 32)?<sup>46</sup> I consider the handling of the same four core themes.

#### The LORD’s Election of Israel and Kindness to Her

The presentation of the election of Israel in contradistinction to the other nations in the two passages is remarkably similar. In the Song the historical retrospective goes back to the distant past, “When the Most High apportioned (**נָחַל**, Hiphil) the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the LORD’s own portion (**הַלְקָה**) was his people, Jacob his allotted share (**נָחַלְתָּה**)” (32:8-9). In Moses’ sermon he says, “Do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted (**הַלְקָה**, Qal) to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession (**נָחַלְתָּה**), as you are now” (4:19-20). In the Song, the Most High (**עֶלְיוֹן**) allotsthe nations to their gods and the LORD’s allotment is Israel. In the sermon, the LORD allotst created things to the peoples and takes Israel for himself. Both renderings point to two different time periods: an allotment to the nations in the ancient past and an emphasis on the time of the exodus for Israel becoming the LORD’s allotment. It is explicit in the

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<sup>46</sup> For my more complete treatment of this passage, see Barrett, “Song of Moses.”

sermon as Israel becomes the LORD's at the point of coming out of the iron-smelter of Egypt (4:20). This is implicit in the Song as the allotment scene flows into the scene of the LORD finding and sustaining Israel in the desert.<sup>47</sup>

A difference between the two passages is the focus on idols in the sermon and on strange gods in the Song. Although differing in emphasis, both passages bring the ideas of idols and strange gods together. In the sermon, Israel will be exiled and “serve other<sup>48</sup> gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone” (4:28). In the Song, the LORD complains, “They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols<sup>49</sup>” (32:21).

The kindness of the LORD to Israel is displayed quite differently in the two passages, with the Song obviously using more metaphorical language. In the Song there are two basic phases of the kindness, one being the wilderness experience (32:10-12) and the other being rich sustenance (32:13-14), presumably pointing to life in the blessed land. In the sermon, the foundational kindness is Israel's extraction from Egypt in the exodus, followed by the Horeb theophany, the giving of the law, the trans-Jordan conquest, and the promised conquest of Canaan. All of this is predicated on a love for and promise to the patriarchs. None of this is present in the Song.<sup>50</sup> However, the overall thrust of the sermon's rendering of the LORD's kindness is the unlikely establishment of a nation—in numbers, law, land and security—from a people out of another nation. It is not a far stretch to see that the Song figures the same kindnesses in terms of moving from a howling wilderness waste (32:10) to being set “atop the heights of the land” and richly feasting on honey, oil, curds, milk, fat, choice wheat and fine wine (32:13-14). Both take Israel from emptiness to fullness, though in very different terms.

Both passages display an intimacy between Israel and the LORD. In the sermon, Moses is proud of the LORD's nearness (4:7), and Israel is assured of the LORD's mercy and commitment to not abandoning her (4:31). In the Song, Israel is portrayed as the LORD's children—albeit degenerate and perverse (32:5-6, 18). She is also his creation (32:15). Significantly, in the sermon the LORD's mercy towards Israel justifies his persistence with her, while the Song does not predicate Israel's restoration on anything like mercy (see below).

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<sup>47</sup> Tradition critics discern two different origin stories here (the exodus and the “tradition of the finding”). Though von Rad cannot attribute the finding to a poetic expression for the exodus, the final canonical form is satisfied to bring these two ideas together. Von Rad points to Hos 9:10 and probably Jer 31:2f as additional witnesses to the tradition of the finding (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 197).

<sup>48</sup> N.B. “other” is not in the Hebrew text.

<sup>49</sup> “With their idols” translates בְּהַבְּלִים (root הַבְּלֵל), which usually means “vanity.” However it is also used as a pejorative term for idols, e.g. 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; Jer 8:19 (where it parallels פְּסָלִים); 18:8; 14:22; Ps 31:7 (Eng. v. 6).

<sup>50</sup> It is significant that the Song makes no reference to the promise to the patriarchs. However, it nods toward that promise when painting the scene of the ancient allotment of nations and gods, for “the LORD's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share” (32:9). Though “Jacob” might be a mere synonym for the nation of Israel, it does provide a tenuous connection to the patriarchal stories.

The asymmetry of the relationship between Israel and the LORD noted in the sermon is expressed in at least as strong terms in the Song. He is faithful and just (32:4); she is degenerate and perverse (32:5). Israel is apportioned as the LORD's possession (32:8-9). She is stranded in the desert; he sustains and guides (32:10-12). In the Song's portrayal, Israel asks for nothings and agrees to nothing. As in the sermon, the LORD is subject and Israel is object, even in kindness.

### The LORD's Commands

The Song is quite unusual within the context of Deuteronomy because it does not mention the LORD giving any commands to Israel. The law is neither celebrated as part of the LORD's kindness nor revealed as to its contents. Thus Israel is not warned about heeding the commands. The contrast with the sermon could not be stronger. It opens and closes with exhortations about the LORD's commands. It emphasizes the role of Moses in communicating them and the necessity of leaving them unchanged. The law prohibiting idolatry is highlighted. Where the sermon is explicit the Song is implicit: it assumes that Israel understands what is expected of her. The common point in both passages is that the LORD has serious expectations for how Israel should respond to him.

### Israel's Disloyalty and the LORD's Anger

The two passages use different rhetorical techniques to present Israel's disloyalty. In the sermon, all of the wood is behind one arrowhead: do not make an idol. The LORD's relationship with Israel is incomparable, so idolatry is foolish. The LORD appeared without form at Horeb, so idolatry is erroneous. The LORD wrote commandments (including a prohibition of idols), so idolatry is disobedience. Things with forms were given to the nations to worship, so idolatry is a rejection of Israel's uniqueness. The LORD is a jealous god, so idolatry is provocative. Israel's identity is defined by the LORD, so idolatry is corruption. So when Moses plays out the scenario of Israel's disloyalty he focuses on idolatry. As the rhetoric goes, Israel has only one essential prohibition so be careful about that one.

In the Song, which does not articulate any commands to Israel, rich imagery portrays the LORD's choice of Israel and lavish care for her that takes her from helplessness in the desert to overwhelming luxury in the land. The blessed people need only say thank you, but instead Israel "abandoned God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation" (32:15). Israel's sin is unconscionable ingratitude.

Despite these significant differences, there is a strong commonality between the two passages. Both focus on Israel's sin as the turning away from the uniquely powerful LORD to embrace other gods who are nothing. The Song emphasizes that in the wilderness "the LORD alone guided him; no foreign god was with him" (32:12) and yet Israel "made him jealous with strange gods" (32:16). Israel

is told that she was “unmindful of the Rock that bore you” (32:18), but embraced worthless rocks. When her strength is gone the LORD will be able to taunt her: “Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge...? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection!” (32:37-38). But their strange gods will be powerless. Likewise in the sermon, Israel is warned not to give up her special relationship with the LORD to embrace images that have been given to the nations. If she disobeys in this, she will be dispersed to those nations where she “will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell” (4:28). Though very different in their portrayals, one focusing on disobedience and the other on ingratitude, ultimately both articulate Israel’s wrong as disloyalty in her relationship to the LORD.

Israel’s disloyalty triggers the LORD’s jealousy in both passages. In the sermon, just before Israel is pictured turning away, she is warned, “The LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (4:24). In the Song, the narrator describes the LORD’s response to Israel’s abandonment: “They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him” (32:16). The LORD then explains himself, “They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols” (32:21). It is this demand for single-minded devotion that drives the LORD’s response to Israel.

The unavoidable result of the LORD’s jealousy and Israel’s disloyalty is prominent in both passages: the Lord is provoked to anger (**כָּעֵס**; 4:25; 32:16, 21) that is like a consuming fire (4:24; 32:22). Both passages portray the destructiveness of this anger for Israel, though in different terms. In the Song, he heaps disasters (**תְּעִוָּת**) upon them (32:23) in the form of hunger, consumption, pestilence, beasts and sword (32:24-25), stopping just short of scattering them (**תַּנֶּפֶת**, Hiphil)<sup>51</sup> and nearly erasing any memory of them (32:26). Israel is bereft: “their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining” (32:36). In the sermon, Israel will soon utterly perish (**אָבֹוד תְּאַבְּדוּן**) and be utterly destroyed (**הַשְׁמִיד תְּשִׁמְדוּן**), with the emphasis twice on violent separation from the land (4:26). Israel is then portrayed as living among the nations, worshipping idols, and being distressed (4:30). While the sermon is explicit and emphatic about exile, the Song portrays utter weakness without detailing what that means for the nation.

Though there are some important differences, the basic pattern in both passages is the same. Israel chooses disloyalty and turns away from exclusive relationship with the LORD. Jealousy for Israel then brings the LORD’s anger upon her in the form of destructive force. Neither passage seeks to justify this response. The moral qualms raised by the modern western reader do not appear to be at all an issue for the ancient writer. It is as if no other path forward would make sense. No consideration is given to allowing Israel her choice or negotiating the terms of the relationship. The LORD is jealous like a consuming fire.

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<sup>51</sup> A *hapex legomenon* as a verb. BDB defines as “cleave in pieces.”

### Reconciliation between the LORD and Israel

Though both passages have Israel brought low by the LORD's violence, she does not remain there but is restored. The most striking difference between the two passages is the reason for the change in Israel's fortunes. The sermon tells the story this way: "In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him. Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them" (4:30-31). The two actors each play their part in the reconciliation: Israel repents by turning back to the LORD and heeding him—a complete change from her previous turning to idols and forgetting him. The LORD, consistent in his character of mercy remains stable in his commitment to Israel, especially in light of his oath to her ancestors. As soon as Israel turns to him, he is willing to receive her. But he is not just passively waiting, for Israel's turning is a result of the distress he has inflicted upon her.

In the Song, the story is very different and is complicated by a third actor: the nations who have wielded the LORD's violent sword against Israel. After her devastation, Israel largely disappears as an active participant in this story. Instead the drama develops between the LORD and the nations. The shift occurs as the LORD considers executing Israel: "I thought to scatter them and blot out the memory of them from humankind; but I feared provocation by the enemy, for their adversaries might misunderstand and say, 'Our hand is triumphant; it was not the LORD who did all this'" (32:26-27). So with Israel seeing that she erred in trusting other gods, the LORD turns to the nations: "the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly" (32:35). Both Israel and the nations are denied the opportunity to brag of their own strength or the strength of any god besides the LORD. The Song is quite unusual in that it shows no dependence between Israel's restoration and her repentance.<sup>52</sup>

But at this point the two passages converge theologically. In the Song, the LORD's triumphant moment is in a speech to Israel (but are the nations also listening?): "See now that *I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me*" (**אני אני הוא ואין אלדים עמדִי**). I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand" (32:39). In the conclusion to the sermon, a similar message is used to explain Israel's very existence: "To you it [the power of the exodus] was shown so that you would acknowledge that *the LORD is God; there is no other besides him*" (**יהוה הוא האלדים**) (4:35) and to deter her from straying: "So acknowledge today and take to heart that *the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other*" (**יהוה הוא האלדים**) (4:39). It is the LORD's incomparability that is at stake, and in particular his relationship with Israel that must be acknowledged.

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<sup>52</sup> Von Rad fittingly refers to the offer of restoration through repentance as "the theme of a fugue in each climax of the Deuteronomistic history," but it is strikingly absent from the Song (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 50).

In the Song, it is unclear what happens with the nations in the LORD's triumph (especially because of the difficulty of interpreting 32:43)—whether they respond to him in any way. The sermon is not interested in the nations at all except in contrast to Israel's special relationship with the LORD. But for Israel, both passages leave a hint of Israel being restored to the land. The sermon reaffirms the LORD's commitment to the patriarchal promises (4:31), in which possession of the land is key. The Song ends with the difficult clause **וְכִפֵּר אֶדְמֹתָיו עַמּוֹ**, which somehow brings together the land, the people and atonement. However it is best translated, there is an idea of restoring the people and the land.

### Summary

In summary, the sermon of Deut 4 and the Song of Moses of Deut 32 tell very much the same broad story of the LORD's election of and kindness toward Israel, the necessity of her loyalty, her future turning away from the LORD to other gods, the LORD's subsequent violence against her, and a restoration of her fortunes after her distress. There are significant differences in the details, particularly in explicit versus implicit commands and expectations of Israel, what kindnesses are emphasized, and what triggers the restoration. However, for my purposes it is important that the role of the LORD's violence and coercion in maintaining his relationship with Israel is remarkably similar in both passages.

## A THEOLOGY OF COERCION

As discussed above, the two emphases of the sermon are the necessity of Israel obeying the LORD's commands and the uniqueness of Israel's relationship with the LORD. Both of these emphases involve the LORD's choices determining Israel's choices.<sup>53</sup> The LORD exercises power and control in both the establishment of the LORD's relationship with Israel and the preservation of it if Israel tries to choose otherwise. I discuss each of these aspects.

### **Uniqueness of the LORD and Israel: Coercive Election?**

Although the LORD is presented as unique in the sermon, this uniqueness is consistently allied with his relationship with Israel. This unique relationship has been established in the original choice of Israel by the LORD to become his own possession and then in the events of the exodus, at Horeb, and in the conquest. The author of this uniqueness is the LORD alone. Israel has not constructed her own uniqueness, but rather he has bestowed it upon her. She is the object of the LORD's designs. In passing, it is worth noting that the nations are likewise the LORD's objects through non-election. As the LORD

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<sup>53</sup> Webster's 9<sup>th</sup> Collegiate Dictionary defines coercion in three ways: 1. to restrain or dominate by force; 2. to compel to an act or choice; 3. to enforce or bring about by force or threat. Although other types of pressure—such as moral or intellectual—could be regarded as coercive, I prefer to call those “persuasion” with coercion necessarily involving force.

has allotted himself for Israel to worship, he has allotted vain created things to the nations for their worship.

The primary goal of the LORD's actions toward Israel is that she will acknowledge him alone as God (vv. 35, 39). This is not a scientific truth for all people everywhere to verify and proclaim, but a relational requirement placed upon Israel. Israel alone is required to say that the LORD is God alone. This particularity is consistent with the aim of gaining Israel's participation in the relationship for which the LORD has chosen her. The LORD's choice alone does not initiate a relationship; Israel needs to do something in order to be involved in it herself. She could receive the gifts of exodus, law and conquest without participating in the relationship the LORD desires. She could even view the theophany objectively and without commitment. But she is required to take a step of participation by acknowledging the LORD.

This first step of participation is then followed by the second: obeying his commands, which boils down to eschewing idols. Israel's worship must be for the LORD alone. She must face him without turning. She must acknowledge him without roaming eyes.

But what is idolatry and why is it so fundamentally prohibited for Israel? Halbertal and Margalit offer a useful study of the topic where they divide idolatry into two quite different errors: worshipping others gods and representing the LORD in forbidden ways.<sup>54</sup> The second error does not seem to be in view Deut 4 as the concern focuses on Israel substituting others for the LORD rather than wrongly understanding the LORD himself.<sup>55</sup> Betrayal of the LORD for idols is the central concern of the sermon. Halbertal and Margalit observe that in the larger canonical context God's relationship with humans "draws on images of human relationships. God is king, father, bridegroom, husband, woman in labor, and judge." These human relationships act as anchors for metaphorical understandings of the LORD's relationship with Israel. Specifically, "the Bible explains idolatry by means of anthropomorphisms describing flawed personal relationships."<sup>56</sup> While the prophets develop an interpretation of idolatry as marital betrayal, the explicit relationship between the LORD and Israel in the sermon is one of owner and property (v. 20).<sup>57</sup> The LORD's kindness to Israel, particularly in the exodus, rightly serves as his bill of ownership over her (v. 20).<sup>58</sup> Turning to idols would be an attempt to nullify his purchase.

<sup>54</sup> Moshe Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-2. <sup>55</sup> *pace* Brueggemann who argues that the idolatry in view here is domestication of the LORD: "Form is a device for making things more certain, more controlled, more palpably available. Thus the great temptation to Israel is an attempt to domesticate YHWH by drawing YHWH into an already known world, and thinking thereby to overcome the risky strangeness that is inherent in covenantal relationship" (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 54-5).

<sup>56</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> But note also the mention of love for her ancestors (v. 37) and covenant (vv. 13, 23, 31), both of which implicitly invoke suzerain/vassal anthropomorphisms (on the meaning of love in the context of suzerainty treaties, cf. William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 [1963]).

<sup>58</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 21

It is not particularly helpful to think of idolatry as “disobedience,” a word that conjures up notions of arbitrary rules that must be obeyed without understanding. Rather, idolatry is disloyalty or failing to live up to obligations. ‘It is important to emphasize that the Israelites’ obligation to God is formulated in the Bible not as an obligation to a principle, or to truth for truth’s sake, but as a personal obligation based on a history of relations that began with the Exodus from Egypt. … Thus any change in attitudes toward the betrayal of that obligation shakes the foundation of the relationship between human beings [in our context it would be better to say ‘Israel’] and God.’<sup>59</sup>

The founding events of exodus, Horeb and conquest—all occurring at the LORD’s initiative—establish a relationship that demands Israel’s loyalty. The LORD’s gifts obligate Israel. The obligatory function of a gift is somewhat confusing to many ears because of the notion that gifts are by definition freely given with no obligation upon the receiver. However, Mauss and others have extensively studied gift exchange in ancient societies and find extensive social systems built around the rules of gifts and reciprocity.<sup>60</sup> Applying Mauss’ ideas to understanding ancient Israel and the OT is a relatively new area of study, but Stansell finds general agreement with the Maussian model there.<sup>61</sup> In such gift giving, the giving of a gift always presents a challenge to the recipient. If the gift is accepted, so is an inescapable obligation to respond properly to the giver. The refusal of a gift heaps scorn upon the giver.<sup>62</sup> So Israel, by accepting the LORD’s gifts, has no choice but loyalty. In her case, she has received the very gift of nationhood—of identity—so to refuse the gift is to cast her identity aside, or to create her own new identity. According to this understanding, Israel’s very existence obligates her to the LORD. Because of the LORD’s gifts, she must live in response to him. She has various avenues for proving disloyal, but the primary one is to redefine herself by attributing the LORD’s gifts to an idol, as she did with the golden calf: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exod 32:4).

But is the election of Israel coercive? The LORD’s actions have certainly changed the possibilities that are open to her. Also she cannot turn her reality back to what it was before—the exodus cannot be reversed. But this alone is not coercion, for in an interrelated world every action changes reality for everyone else to some degree. Coercion involves the exertion of force to limit the choices of the weaker party severely. The LORD’s gift obligates Israel but does not force her to respond as he wishes. It does not seem then that election is coercion because Israel still has the choice

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<sup>59</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 31. I would add that the history of relations certainly goes back to the patriarchs, though the exodus is the decisive moment.

<sup>60</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 2001).

<sup>61</sup> Gary Stansell, “The Gift in Ancient Israel,” *Semeia* 87 (1999): 86. Another example of applying these ideas to the OT is Victor H. Matthews, “The Unwanted Gift: Implications of Obligatory Gift Giving in Ancient Israel,” *Semeia* 87 (1999).

<sup>62</sup> Stansell, “Gift in Ancient Israel,” 69-70.

of whether to respond to the LORD or not. It is undeniable that the LORD has intruded forcefully into her life, but the possibility remains open for her to reject the obligation that has been placed upon her. She has been chosen and thereby made unique, but her handling of that uniqueness remains open. Thus the sermon's rhetoric aims to persuade Israel to choose as the LORD desires—persuasion is unnecessary under coercion. However, this all changes when the LORD threatens violence for Israel's disloyalty.

### **Coerced, Exclusive Loyalty**

"The LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (v. 24). Jealousy is the counterpart of betrayal, the response of the betrayed.<sup>63</sup> For unexplained reasons the LORD demands exclusivity in his relationship with Israel. And he is willing to use his power to gain it. But he does not threaten arbitrary suffering, rather his threat concerns removal of his gifts to Israel. She will be destroyed from the land. She will be exiled to live among other nations, as she lived in Egypt. She will worship other gods instead of the one who revealed himself at Horeb. She will diminish from being a mighty nation to a mere few in number. The LORD's threat is the loss of all she has gained from his kindness. In an economic sense his threat seems fair: rejection of his gift means its loss. It almost places a disinterested "take it or leave it" postscript on the gift card. However such an analysis ignores the real choice before Israel: she is threatened with almost complete bankruptcy and loss of identity. At this point, Israel is undoubtedly being coerced to remain loyal to the LORD. Her situation is little different from having a gun to her head. She must choose the LORD's way or death. Opposition to him would have to be either highly principled or insane.

Yet the LORD's threat is not utterly complete, because he does not threaten Israel's election—he does not threaten his own ultimate desire. He knows that she will be his in the end. The utter skeptic could dismiss his explanation as "spin control"—that he will bring Israel back to him out of his mercy and his oath to Israel's ancestors (v. 31)—but the clear intent is for Israel to understand that she cannot lose all she has gained from the LORD. She is secure in his mercy and oath. But security is the other side of the coin from coercion: the LORD will have his way in the end and Israel has no choice. Israel cannot even choose death. It is not a gun that is held to her head but an even more powerful weapon of persuasion that even principles and insanity cannot defeat. A rigidly disciplined soul might be able to resist torture, but Israel will not be able to resist the LORD's coercive power.

What then is the logic of revealing Israel's security in the LORD's election? Does this not undercut his threat of destruction for disloyalty? Surprisingly it is the reverse: the assurance of the LORD's will overruling Israel's will completes his threat. He does not say, "Even if you disobey, fear not, it will turn out fine in the end." Rather, he says, "You are mine and you will remain mine. We can

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 25.

do this the hard way or we can do it the easy way, but you are mine.” The LORD’s coercion is complete.<sup>64</sup>

But I must not leave the portrayal at this point, for “coercion” has such negative overtones that it might be overlooked that the LORD has been overwhelmingly good to Israel. He has brought her from the nothingness of slavery to the brink of peace and prosperity in her own land. She is undoubtedly the better for the LORD’s gifts. But the one thing she lacks is self-determination. Is this acceptable? The American patriot Patrick Henry took his stand by saying, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Israel seemingly cannot have liberty in the sense of autonomy. But neither can she choose death. She is the LORD’s.

### **Coercion and Liberty in Modern Politics and Ethics**

#### **Is Israel Free?**

Coercion is the elimination of freedom, but what is freedom? How can Israel’s situation be understood in political and ethical terms? Berlin describes two different kinds of freedom that have been discussed in modern political theory.<sup>65</sup> “Negative freedom” is the specification of a certain number of individual human rights that can never be abridged by the ruling authority. It admits that individual freedom is not the sole value of a society and that freedoms must sometimes be sacrificed for other ideals, such as health, food, order, justice, happiness, culture, security and equality. However, within the doctrine of negative freedom, certain core freedoms cannot be violated on any account and government enforces these limitations. Societies must decide what the limited freedoms are, with the choices being in line with the society’s understanding of what basic humanity entails. Although negative freedom is often associated with democratic governments, it is not empirically justifiable that either democracy produces the broadest freedoms and resulting flourishing of human life, or that autocracy is incompatible with it.<sup>66</sup>

“Positive freedom” comes from the desire to be one’s own master. Not satisfied with the guarantee of minimal negative freedoms, this doctrine says, “I wish to be subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it

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<sup>64</sup> Von Rad comments, “Yahweh’s relationship to Israel, which he created by such great deeds and maintained for so long, cannot have been in vain!” It is difficult to tell whether he says this rhetorically or declaratively, but it seems the former since he has just written about the writer of Deut 4 and the prophets similarly trying “to make the people understand that the door through which they may return to Yahweh is still standing open” (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 51). There is a significant difference between the LORD being open to Israel’s return and coercing Israel’s return.

<sup>65</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberalism and Its Critics* (ed. Michael J. Sandel; Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>66</sup> “The evidence of history tends to show...that integrity, love of truth, and fiery individualism grow at least as often in severely disciplined communities among, for example, the puritan Calvinists of Scotland or New England, or under military discipline, as in more tolerant or indifferent societies.” “The answer to the question ‘Who governs me?’ is logically distinct from the question ‘How far does government interfere with me?’” (Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 21-2).

were, from outside.”<sup>67</sup> The problem for positive freedom is that my purposes may involve controlling what others are free to do. Even more insidiously, I may be limited by my own base passions that require some coercion in order to liberate me to my “real self.” So for one’s negative freedom authority must be curbed while for positive freedom one demands authority for oneself or some other transcendent, dominant controller.

Given the choice between the two, Berlin decides that negative freedom is truer because human ideals are fundamentally in conflict with one another so there is no perfect solution for humanity. Therefore, since “total human fulfilment is a formal contradiction,” a society must be pluralistic so that all people are free to choose their own ways to the best partial fulfillment they can achieve.<sup>68</sup>

How does the LORD’s coercive election and preservation of Israel as his people fit Berlin’s framework? It is clear that Israel does not have the sort of negative freedom that Berlin describes, for at least three reasons. First, Israel is primarily treated as a single collective and not a group of individuals. *Israel* must worship the LORD alone. *Israel* will suffer for idolatry. Individual choices of loyalty are acknowledged—and even emphasized—in reference to the Beth-peor incident (4:3-4), but the thrust of the sermon treats Israel as one. Second, by any reckoning the most minimal human right to be protected is life itself.<sup>69</sup> But this is precisely what the LORD threatens to take away if Israel is disloyal. Third, in Berlin’s characterization the freedoms to be preserved are those that are deeply recognized to be grounded in the nature of human beings. But if anything is universally human—especially in the biblical worldview—it is the worship of idols. Furthermore, in the sermon the LORD acknowledges that some people (i.e., the nations) are allotted to worship idols and only Israel belongs to him. So the coercion of worship of the LORD alone fails the test of universality as well as the empirical consensus concerning human nature. The LORD does not seem to put a priority on protecting Israel’s population’s “human rights.”<sup>70</sup>

But does Israel experience positive freedom? Within this doctrine, it may be justifiable “to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt.”<sup>71</sup> Does the LORD then give Israel positive freedom by coercing her into relationship with him? I tend to think not for three reasons. First, it is unclear that Israel would choose devotion to the LORD for herself if she were more enlightened or less ignorant. To choose an idol over the LORD is to corrupt herself

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<sup>67</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 23.

<sup>68</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 33.

<sup>69</sup> This is not true if the opportunity for life after death is in view, however this is not the case for the sermon.

<sup>70</sup> Yet it is noteworthy that the law given to Israel is quite adamant that Israel’s human government be concerned with human rights (though not identical with modern values). Thus, for example, the power of Israel’s monarch is strictly limited (Deut 7:14-20).

<sup>71</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 24.

(4:25), but not a corruption of her humanity but of her “Israel-ness.” To be Israel—the LORD’s possession—is not her nature (cf. 7:7-8) but a result of her election. For her to choose to abandon her election would not be rejection of her humanity but a rejection of what the LORD wants for her.<sup>72</sup> Second, it could be argued that loyalty to the LORD is in her own self-interest because he has given her a supremely just law (4:8, 40). But while this is undoubtedly a benefit of her election, it is not identical with devotion to the LORD. The two are interwoven, but throughout history many have sought to construct systems of just laws—even basing them upon Israel’s publicly available laws—without worshipping the LORD as a people. Third, the universal human demand for fairness resists the LORD singling out Israel while leaving other nations to worship lies.<sup>73</sup> Would it not be reasonable for an enlightened Israel to reject the LORD’s choice of her in solidarity with her un-chosen brothers and sisters of the nations? It seems that Berlin would, as he gives examples of sacrificing one’s own freedom out of the demands of equality and the love of fellow humans.<sup>74</sup> I conclude that the coercion of Israel in the sermon is far from fitting the ideals of either negative or positive freedom as articulated by Berlin, though it is much closer to positive than negative.

However, with one vital adjustment Israel’s situation becomes exactly a case of positive freedom. The important difference is that the LORD’s desires are primary, not Israel’s. If positive freedom begins with the declaration, “I am subject, not object,” Israel does not have it, for she is refused the role of subject until she acknowledges the LORD as God. Within the context of relationship with the LORD, she has wide ranging—though necessarily limited—freedom, but this primary point is nonnegotiable. It is demanded by the LORD for the LORD’s own purposes, not demonstrably for Israel’s own good. The LORD must have Israel’s trust in this one thing, which of course by its nature multiplies to become trusting him in all things. Berlin’s analysis of freedom has no room for an extra-human good and our text—though concerned with human good—gives the LORD’s preferences complete precedence over it.

#### The Modern Response to the LORD

What are we in the modern west to make of the ethics of the LORD’s action in Israel’s life, as presented in Deut 4? Certainly coercive force in personal relationships is seen as deeply problematic. But in some theological circles it is preferred to uphold the biblical past as purer and truer than the present and to seek to conform modern ethics to those presented in the biblical text. This is especially true when the text’s ethics are presented as those of the LORD and not simply human society.

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<sup>72</sup> There is obviously a connection between the LORD and all of his creation, which implies that everyone somehow indulges an irrational perversion by seeking life apart from him. Yet the sermon teaches that the vast majority of humanity is given by the LORD himself to worship things other than himself (v. 19).

<sup>73</sup> Lewis goes so far as to use fairness as a demonstration of the universal belief in right and wrong (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1984], 19).

<sup>74</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 18.

However, while there is much to be learned from the biblical presentation of the LORD, it would be foolish to eschew all modern advances in ethics. Berger, a critic of modernity's excesses, warns:

Anyone denouncing the modern world *tout court* should pause and question whether he wishes to include in that denunciation the specifically modern discoveries of human dignity and human rights. The conviction that even the weakest members of society have an inherent right to protection and dignity; the proscription of slavery in all its forms, of racial and ethnic oppression; the staggering discovery of the dignity and rights of the child; the new sensitivity to cruelty...; all these, and others, are moral achievements that would be unthinkable without the peculiar constellations of the modern world. To reject them is unthinkable ethically. By the same token, it is not possible to simply trace them to a false anthropology.<sup>75</sup>

The central difficulty for modern ethics acknowledging the divine ethics of Deut 4 is that the existence of an involved and relational God defies the humanistic ground rules. The modern development of political theory with its fear of oppressive *human* power has largely managed to neutralize that power through the development of human rights and the doctrine of negative freedom, the separation of government powers, the rule of constitutional law, the accountability of democratic government, the allocation of the monopoly of coercive power to the government, etc. The modern world is validly concerned about the abuse of oppressive power. In living memory we have numerous tragic examples of initial innocence and beneficence metamorphosing into cruel inhumanity. So when the powerful LORD, rendered so vividly, anthropomorphically and anthropopathically in the biblical text, appears as a consuming fire filled with jealousy, is it any surprise that he is condemned for his very power regardless of how it is used? If he then uses that power in a way that obviously—to the modern reader—violates Israel's basic human rights, the necessary conclusion is that he is unworthy of the power he wields. The modern critic then searches for a way to emasculate him, through disbelief, reinterpretation, ridicule or moral censure.

But is this the necessary understanding and outcome? The modern attitude towards power is constructed around observations of human abuse. Is it necessarily correct then to interpret as abuse the divine use of power that would be abusive if wielded by a human? Can an ethical system constructed around functional atheism and vigorous belief in the fundamental equality of all humanity respond adequately to the categorical inequality of God and humanity, and indeed the inequality of different nations, presented in the text? As noted above, a triumph of modernity is the complete proscription of slavery: it is unacceptable for one person to own another. Yet, the LORD asserts his ownership of Israel, seemingly in violation of this hard-won prohibition. And in his jealous, coercive violence against her, he seems to confirm the horrible image of the disgraceful slave owner that led to its abolition. Yet the LORD is not human—does this fundamentally limit the ethical proscription of owning people?

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<sup>75</sup> P. Berger, "Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour," in *Liberalism and Its Critics* (ed. Michael J. Sandel; Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 157-8.

Through the study of Deut 4, I have sought to clarify the dynamics of the relationship between the LORD and Israel, specifically how the LORD uses violence and coercion as a response to Israel's disloyalty to him. This feature of the LORD's character is objectionable to many unsympathetic modern readers. It is also overlooked or apologized for by many sympathetic fideists. My goal is to clarify the difficulties that are—or should be—faced by modern readers, and then take steps toward facing them. I judge this to be an important task for bringing faith and reason together. I am consoled in my critical study of the LORD's portrayal in the biblical text in that there is precedent for a faithful follower asking the LORD, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:25).

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