

The Song of Moses: Exploring the LORD's Wrath Against Disloyal Israel

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THE PROBLEM OF COVENANT CURSES

Sometimes it is best to begin with a story, so I start by eavesdropping on young John's religious education from the masked Steward, the Christian authority in C. S. Lewis's *Pilgrim's Regress*:

'Now I am going to talk to you about the Landlord. The Landlord owns all the country, and it is *very, very* kind of him to allow us to live on it at all—very, very kind.' ... The Steward then took down from a peg a big card with small print all over it, and said, 'Here is a list of all the things the Landlord says you must not do. You'd better look at it.' ... 'I hope,' said the Steward, 'that you have not already broken any of the rules? ... Because, you know, if you did break any of them and the Landlord got to know of it, do you know what he'd do to you? ... He'd take you and shut you up for ever and ever in a black hole full of snakes and scorpions as large as lobsters—for ever and ever. And besides that, he is such a kind, good man, so very, very kind, that I am sure you would never *want* to displease him.' 'No, sir,' said John. 'But, please, sir...' 'Well,' said the Steward. 'Please, sir, supposing I did break one, one little one, just by accident, you know. Could nothing stop the snakes and lobsters?' 'Ah!...' said the Steward; and then he sat down and talked for a long time, but John could not understand a single syllable. However, it all ended with pointing out that the Landlord was quite extraordinarily kind and good to his tenants, and would certainly torture most of them to death the moment he had the slightest pretext. 'And you can't blame him,' said the Steward. 'For

after all, it is his land, and it *is* so very good of him to let us live here at all—people like us, you know.¹

This ridiculous portrayal of the LORD's relationship with his people reveals profound reflection upon the Deuteronomic covenant curses. The confluence of divine love, commandment, wrath and forbearance with sinful humanity defies simplistic theologizing, leaving many to overemphasize one characteristic of the LORD to the detriment of the complexity and depth of the biblical presentation. Some see him as nothing but kind, others as nothing but hateful and angry. Some see him as choking off life with rules, others as uninterested in humanity's destruction of self and world. And if one asks a simple question about what the LORD is doing, the response can sometimes be a tangle of unintelligible theological claptrap that is really no response at all. At the risk of adding unnecessarily to the Steward's theologizing, I endeavor in this paper to explore the LORD's anger and violence against his chosen and disobedient people as presented in one key passage of scripture: the Song of Moses (Deut 32).

Why is this subject of interest? For many centuries the anger of the LORD as presented in the OT has been a difficulty for Christian thinkers. The ante-Nicene father Lactantius wrote "A Treatise on the Anger of God" to refute the philosophers' position "that God is not subject to anger; since the divine nature is either altogether beneficent, and that it is inconsistent with His surpassing and excellent power to do injury to any one; or, at any rate, He takes no notice of us at all, so that no advantage comes to us from His goodness, and no evil from His ill-will."² He strenuously argues that the LORD's love implies anger as well as kindness—an unpopular opinion for his audience. From a different point of view, Marcion could not reconcile the severe and angry aspects of the God of the OT with the loving and gracious God of the NT, and thus divided them. In our own era, von Harnack has taken the Marcionite position and has chided the church for not having the courage to declare openly that Marcion was right.³ There is something to Harnack's rebuke, for some parts of the church regularly and implicitly silence the troubling violence of the LORD.⁴

The rejection of the LORD's violence is a reflection of contemporary Western culture. Our culture strongly rejects violence and coercion in personal relationships. In modern western societies, the state maintains a monopoly on the use of violent force. Until fairly recently, a sole exception has

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity Reason and Romanticism* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose and Co. Ltd., 1943), 21-2.

² Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God*, Chapter 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. 1997.

³ *** need reference.

⁴ Cf. Rob Barrett, "The Troubling Violence of the Lord: Engaging the Curses of Deuteronomy," n.p. cited Mar. 25, 2005. Online: <http://www.coffeewithbarretts.com/writings/TroublingViolence.pdf>.

been the right of parents to threaten and use limited physical violence against their children as part of their rearing. But anti-spanking/smacking laws are increasingly common.⁵ The state alone, through police and court-mediated judgments, is able to use violence in the form of restraint, jails, and prisons to coerce into submission those suspected or convicted of criminal behavior. It is only this impersonal state (symbolized by the statue of blindfolded, impartial Justice at the United States Supreme Court building) who is allowed to wield the sword, according to the letter of codified laws, with scientific and mechanical precision, in order to constrain citizens to do what the democratic citizenry itself has decided is best.

How different is the portrayal of the LORD in the OT. This God is passionate in both love and anger, proactively wielding both his loving wings and sharp sword, inscrutably choosing some for special treatment and not choosing others, commanding obedience and yet allowing freedom, harshly killing some apparently trivial offenders while allowing some infamous perpetrators to profit richly from their cruelties. Contemporary theological scholarship struggles to understand—sometimes apologizing for and sometimes irreverently ridiculing—this culturally offensive God of the OT. In Brueggemann's effort to craft a fair and plain portrayal of the LORD as presented in the OT, he finds within Israel's self-conscious theological statements the claim that the LORD is steadfast, faithful, just and true. However, he also discovers, as a by-product of Israel's writings about the LORD, a counter-theme that the LORD is on occasion "devious, ambiguous, irascible, and unstable."⁶ Brueggemann's analysis comes under headings that describe the LORD's activities as abusive, deceptive, contradictory, unreliable, and profoundly irrational. Brueggemann refers to the passage considered in this essay as an example of his claim that "Yahweh does evil as well as good."⁷ I can only infer from his reference to Deut 32:39—where the LORD asserts himself as the one who puts to death and wounds (in addition to giving life and healing)—that Brueggemann sees it as self-evident that killing and wounding are morally evil.⁸

⁵ One extreme example of a non-coercive approach to childrearing is "Taking Children Seriously" (<http://www.takingchildrenseriously.com/>), which recommends finding mutually-agreeable solutions to family differences, ultimately privileging children's preferences for themselves above their parents'.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997), 359.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 538.

⁸ His portrayal of the LORD's jealousy bears some resemblance to the Steward's in Lewis's story above: "Any departure of Israel from singular obedience to Yahweh evokes harsh, destructive response from Yahweh." He cites the Song of Moses to prove this claim as well: Deut 32:16, 21 (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 293). Interpreting Brueggemann here depends greatly on how one reads the terms "harsh" and "destructive." Obviously he exaggerates and distorts the OT portrayal with such language as "any departure" and "singular obedience" since the LORD leaves many offenses unpunished.

So I find in both popular and scholarly circles a struggle to understand the LORD in his violent acts. What to do and where to begin? I have chosen to focus on the LORD's violence toward Israel. Violence toward the nations is currently a popular theme in biblical studies and theological reflection, especially with respect to ארץ against the Canaanites in Deuteronomy and Joshua. Yet since the principle focus of the OT is on the LORD's relationship with Israel, it seems most productive to begin with a study of the LORD's violence there, where the material is more comprehensive. This violence appears in many places and forms in the OT, but one of the larger themes is that of the covenant curses. In Lev 26 and Deut 28, Israel is offered a choice between two paths: obedience to the LORD's commandments will result in his blessings upon them, but disobedience will bring down his violent curses. These blessings and curses provide a core theme of both the Deuteronomic History (Deut-Kings) and the prophets.

Deuteronomy, as a markedly theological book with much more subtlety and richness than often attributed to it, is the core text for this study. And in this essay I focus on the so-called Song of Moses (Deut 32) along with its narrative introduction in the preceding chapter. The Song displays considerable theological depth. Brueggemann singles out the Song as "a major theological articulation that is representative of Deuteronomic theology and indeed of the primary themes of Old Testament faith."⁹ But beyond its general theological profundity, the Song has particular value for interpreting the LORD's violence against Israel in the form of covenant curses. It seems that the curses are presented in the OT with at least three different emphases: *warning*, *theodicy*, and *interpretation*. Deut 28 is an excellent example of *warning*—the curses are presented as part of an exhortation to obedience. By its nature, warning must come before the curses fall and looks ahead to them as a future threat. *Theodicy* is the justification of the LORD's applying the curses, an attempt to prove him just and right in causing Israel's suffering. A good example of theodicy is the Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7). By its nature, theodicy must happen after the offense happens and looks backward in time at it. It could prepare for the coming curses or look back on them retrospectively. *Interpretation* goes beyond theodicy in that it explains the purpose of the curses. Interpretation comes after the curses have fallen, but with a view both to the past (to understand it) and to the future (to guide it). Interpretation hopes for a better future with the curses and their interpretation working together. Theodicy can certainly be an important component of interpretation. It is the Song's role as *interpreter* of the covenant curses that makes it most interesting as a text for studying the wrath of the LORD against disobedient Israel.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 282-3.

Method and Goal

The goal of this study is to gain insight into the purpose of the LORD's violence toward disobedient Israel, and especially how this is to be understood by a culture that strongly censures violence. Specifically, my study is prompted by two large and interrelated questions. First, how can this violence of the LORD against Israel be seen as righteous? And second, how is it a tool for moving from disobedience and fractured relationship toward reconciliation? I do not pretend to hide my vantage point; I am an American Christian strongly influenced by Reformed theology. By examining the Song of Moses in its final and canonical form, I explore this text that, in part, guides the self-understanding and formation of Christians, as well as other peoples of faith.

Rather than jump to a two-testament understanding of the text, in this essay I seek to hear the OT's voice alone. Although I do not seek to stand apart from my Christian frame of reference, my goal is to avoid overtly importing Christian thought into the present study. My greater interest lies in understanding how Jesus and the NT add their voices to the OT, but such reflections are outside the scope of this essay.

Because of my goal of digging into the purpose and morality of this violence, I consciously exclude certain vocabulary from the discussion. I avoid the term "deserve," in the sense that "Israel deserved her¹⁰ suffering." Such statements avoid the problem I address because the key question is *why* such treatment is deserved? I also avoid the term "justice," in the sense that "the LORD's violence was just" or "justice demanded such treatment," for these obscure the question of where this idea of justice comes from and what it accomplishes. Lastly, I avoid the term "punish," as in "the LORD punished Israel for her disobedience," because this again raises the question of why such action should be seen as good or appropriate punishment. I do not pretend to understand how punishment for wrongdoing works and under what conditions it should be seen as good and right.

As may be obvious from the previous paragraph, I take a basically pragmatic approach to ethics in this study. The morality of actions is largely determined by the agents' goals and the outcomes. I have a basic theological premise that the LORD is purposeful and competent, i.e. he has goals and he acts in such a way that his goals are realized—though not necessarily in anything like a straight-line manner. So my theological reflections likewise consider the LORD's pragmatics.

I use the term "violence" with some hesitation. By it I mean an act where a superior power wields that power to threaten or actually cause the suffering of a weaker party. I understand that the

¹⁰ 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.

term carries a negative and immoral connotation for many people. I do not intend any moral bias by the word and would use an unbiased alternative if I knew one. It may be helpful to realize that our own society embraces certain forms of violence as completely moral and acceptable, such as the arrest and imprisonment of a murderer. It is only the power of the police and prison guards to inflict suffering upon the murderer that accomplishes restraint. I should note here that violence is closely related to coercion, which is the use of power against someone in order to force a decision that would not otherwise be made. Violence, or the threat thereof, is often used for coercive purposes. We shall see that the Song has no difficulty in presenting the LORD as both righteous and coercive of Israel's loyalty to him.

CURRENT CONSENSUS OF INTERPRETATION

In my reading of the Song, I differ from significant elements of the current consensus of interpretation as represented by commentators of Deuteronomy in general (e.g., von Rad, Tigay, Brueggemann and McConville) and of the Song in particular (e.g., Wright and Wiebe).¹¹ In this section, I review the relevant reasoning and conclusions. I also outline my alternative approach and some of its conclusions, with details to follow in the exegesis below.

(Dis-)Connection with the Narrative Context

The Song is prefaced by a narrative that explains why it was written (31:16-30). Commentators often discount this canonical explanation. Von Rad writes, "This interpretation of the Song... is a very arbitrary one, and it must be said that it diminishes to some extent the purport of the Song."¹² McConville sees "an incongruity in the preparation for the Song in 31:16-22 and the Song itself."¹³ Tigay agrees, arguing that the narrative introduction only fits the first half of the Song (vv. 1-25) but disregards the second half.¹⁴ All three see the narrative introduction as describing a song that indicts Israel for covenant unfaithfulness and justifies the LORD's punishment. But the Song itself goes beyond indictment and justification, continuing on with the saving of Israel from complete destruction and the punishment of the nations. This apparent incongruity (among others) leads source and form critics to conclude that the Song has an independent history from the narrative. I will not comment on

¹¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (trans. Dorothea Barton; London: SCM Press, 1966); Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996-06-01); Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002); G. Ernest Wright, "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson; London: SCM Press, 1962); J. M. Wiebe, "The Form, Setting and Meaning of the Song of Moses," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 17 (1989).

¹² Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 190-1.

¹³ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 437.

¹⁴ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 506.

suggested pre-histories of the received text, but it would be wrong to decide too quickly that the Song has been force-fit into its context and that its interpretation is thereby distorted by that context. I will argue in my exegesis that a consistent reading with the narrative context is not only possible but helpful for interpreting the Song theologically.

Reading the Song as an Independent Unit (Form Criticism)

Von Rad writes, “The so-called Song of Moses is a long widely ranging poem which came into existence quite independently of Deuteronomy. In consequence its nature and origin can be determined only by internal evidence.”¹⁵ Likewise, many commentators excise the Song from its context to discover its meaning.¹⁶ For form critics, the isolatable Song is too tempting a unit to ignore. However, there is no consensus on identifying its genre, a critical step in the form critical method. Wiebe notes that previous genre labels for the Song include “a religio-political song” to recruit warriors for battle [Cassuto]; “a prophetic theodicy” [Mendenhall]; and a “didactic poem” [Bentzen, Driver, Labuschagne, Craigie].¹⁷ However he and most recent commentators follow the lead of Wright¹⁸ in likening the Song to a *rib* or “covenant lawsuit.”¹⁹ However, the Song does not fit that form very well. The Song stretches it to the breaking point, leading Wright to call it an elaborated or expanded lawsuit, and Wiebe a “deliberative *rib*.”²⁰ Wright summarizes this covenant lawsuit form as containing five elements: (1) Call to the witnesses to give ear to the proceedings; (2) Introductory statement of the case at issue by the Divine Judge and Prosecutor or by his earthly official; (3) Recital of the benevolent acts of the Suzerain; (4) The indictment; and (5) The sentence.²¹ While this outline has some resemblance to the first part of the Song (the end point is disputed), it does not guide the reading from about v. 26 onward. Attempts at modifying the lawsuit genre to fit the Song have not gained general agreement. Tigay goes further and argues against even starting with the covenant lawsuit form. He cites its wisdom character,²² its lack of mention of the covenant (preferring

¹⁵ Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 195.

¹⁶ Brueggemann is a noteworthy exception. Although he concludes that “it is almost surely an independent poem that has been secondarily placed here,” his commentary seeks to hold the narrative introduction and Song together (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 273-84).

¹⁷ Wiebe, “Song of Moses,” 121.

¹⁸ Wright, “Lawsuit of God,”

¹⁹ Brueggemann wholeheartedly endorses Wright (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 277). McConville is more guarded: “The structure of the Song partially resembles the well-known ANE lawsuit pattern,” citing H. B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959) (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 451).

²⁰ Wright, “Lawsuit of God,” 42; Wiebe, “Song of Moses,” 127.

²¹ Wright, “Lawsuit of God,” 52.

²² “Various features of wisdom literature appear throughout the poem, such as its characterization as a ‘teaching’ (v. 2), its attribution of sin to foolishness (vv. 6, 28-29), its appeal to elders (v. 7), and terminology characteristic of wisdom literature, such as *tahappukhot*, ‘treachery, turnabout’ (v. 20)” (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 509).

father/child over suzerain/vassal imagery to depict the LORD and Israel), and the absence of any role for the heaven and earth in offering testimony, judging, or punishing. He concludes, “The argument that the poem is modeled on a ‘lawsuit’ for breach of covenant is unconvincing.”²³

The interpretive question remains whether the Song fits a definable genre, and if so what interpretive power results from the genre identification. Gemser examines the concept of *rib* or controversy and its place in the Hebrew worldview.²⁴ He finds that controversy and strife are remarkably common in the OT, and that their form indicates a people who see the world—and more importantly the LORD—as personalistic (as opposed to naturalistic or mechanical; I would use the term “relational”), ethical, dramatic and unsystematic. It would be wrong to infer from the Hebrew idea of *rib* that their world was litigious in the modern sense of precise written laws, formal procedures, impersonal justice, and a state monopoly on judicial proceedings. Rather, issues were to be worked out “on the ground” between vested parties, within the community, according to common ethical ideas. Gemser is doubtless correct in this observation.

Gunkel and Begrich focus not on the concept of the *rib*, but the formal genre of “lawsuit” (or “*Gerichtsrede*”). As summarized by Huffmon, this form is used to characterize and interpret texts.²⁵ In such lines of inquiry, the abstracted features and structure of the genre are used to draw disparate texts together for analytical purposes. Of particular interest, the Song is made comparable to prophetic texts with which it shares common formal features. When form critics refer to the Song as a *rib* or lawsuit, they do not mean that it is presented as a controversy, in Gemser’s sense, but that its form fits one of the two described by Huffmon, and that it is best understood according to the historical use of the historically reconstructed genre.

It is relatively easy to define literary patterns and the *rib* or lawsuit is such a defined form. But attaching meanings to patterns is more difficult. As Huffmon points out, form criticism has been more successful at identifying genres than clarifying their historical settings.²⁶ As Huffmon struggles to understand the judicial role of “heaven and earth,” who are called as judges/witnesses in this genre, he must finally admit that further historical understanding of ancient near eastern court procedures are needed to understand the metaphorical court of the literary genre.²⁷ It soon becomes clear that the form critical genre of “lawsuit” may be of literary interest, but in my view, as it is currently used, it

²³ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 510.

²⁴ B. Gemser, “The *Rib*—or Controversy—Pattern in Hebrew Mentality,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Noth and D. W. Thomas; 1955).

²⁵ Huffmon, “Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,”

²⁶ Huffmon, “Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” 285.

²⁷ Huffmon, “Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” 292-3.

abandons or misguides the interpreter more than it informs. First, it abandons the interpreter because the analogy to human lawsuits seems to be ill-fitting at the most basic logical level. For example, if the LORD is the plaintiff with a complaint against accused Israel, then who is the judge? If the LORD is both plaintiff and judge, does the analogy to human courts not simply break down? If heaven and earth are witnesses, where is their testimony? If they are judges, why does the LORD speak the indictment and sentence? Why does the accused not offer a defense? If the case is so obviously resolved by the accusations alone, why is there a court proceeding at all? In the two prophetic examples of the “lawsuit” genre that Huffmon offers, the sentence is “the people should live up to the covenant obligations.”²⁸ In what sense is this a sentence? The connection between literary form and analogy to human courts is simply not useful. Second, the genre label misguides the modern interpreter because it is difficult to avoid importing the modern judicial setting into one’s reading of something called a “lawsuit.” I tend to agree with Gemser’s understanding of the Hebrew *rib*, which as noted bears little resemblance to modern legal proceedings. One simple example of the misguidance is how modern courts assume an impartial, level-headed, unemotional judge with no personal interest in the proceedings. When the LORD appears in the so-called “lawsuit” texts as angry, jealous, and castigating, it is jarring to the reader who is wrongly imagining a modern courtroom.

Furthermore, how does the identification of the “lawsuit” genre clarify the purpose of the text? If one thinks the Song is a “lawsuit,” how does that clarify the rhetoric? Is the author’s intended reader response to condemn an ancient generation of Israelites? to be convinced of the justice of the LORD in this historical case? to join the fight against nations who oppress Israel? I fail to see the value in the genre identification.

Mendenhall, a sharp critic of applying form criticism to the Song, argues that the text is a “prophetic oracle” that speaks into a particular historical occasion. He claims that “the usual stylistic and form-critical analyses are simply irrelevant. What we must deal with is not mere literary ‘form,’ but with the language and content.”²⁹ Since he sees the Song as a poetic reaction to the destruction of Shiloh, he concludes, “The social occasion of Deuteronomy 32 is, then, the very understandable gathering of the survivors to consider what was the cause of the calamity, and what should be the future policy.”³⁰ I think Mendenhall goes too far in dismissing form criticism, however I do see the “lawsuit” genre identification as unhelpful for interpreting the Song. Perhaps a better form critical

²⁸ Huffmon, “Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” 287, 289.

²⁹ George E. Mendenhall, “Samuel’s ‘Broken *Rib*’: Deuteronomy 32,” in *No Famine in the Land* (ed. James W. Flanagan and Anita Weisbrod Robinson; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 67.

³⁰ Mendenhall, “Samuel’s ‘Broken *Rib*,” 69.

approach would be to understand the role of the Song in canonical scripture, i.e. why were the prophetic reflections put into poetic form, written down, and preserved for future generations of Israelites?

Laying aside arguments over the Song's form for a moment, I must question the isolation of the Song for its interpretation. Form criticism can, in some cases, provide rich insights into the tradition-history of a text and its cultural context. Further, understanding a text's genre is critical for avoiding the misinterpretation of its contents.³¹ However, for a canonical reading, the context of the unit is at least equally critical for avoiding misinterpretation. As Childs writes about the Song, "It has long been evident that ch. 32 has undergone a lengthy period of independent existence and only secondarily has been given its present context in relation to ch. 31. Still little attention has been paid to its new role in this final form. From a canonical perspective this question is critical."³² Regardless of any history behind the text, it is the choice of this particular text and the author/redactor's placement of it here within its context that guides the canonical interpreter. Yes the understanding of genre (at all levels, from the smallest strophe to the book and the collection) is critical, but in the end the text is unique and the unique Song must be understood in its unique context. Indeed as Brueggemann points out, the narrative introduction to the Song "offers a peculiarly self-conscious piece of theological anticipation as a rationale for the Song that is to follow."³³ It is exactly this peculiar, self-conscious, and theological rationale that should be given a primary place for interpreting the Song within the canon.

Purpose of the Song

Form critics seek to understand the Song's purpose by analyzing its internal structure, describing its genre, defining its historical setting, and thereby discerning its purpose.³⁴ To understand it within its context, that internally-discerned purpose needs then to be compared with the purpose given by its context. Tigay speaks for many commentators when he decides that the two cannot be reconciled: "Since the poem not only attests to Israel's guilt, as 31:19 says it will, but also predicts that God will rescue Israel and punish its enemies (vv. 26-43), it could not have been composed to serve solely as a prediction and explanation of disaster, as 31:16-21 says."³⁵

³¹ Barton gives an excellent overview of the importance of genre recognition for reading with literary competence. His example of the possibility of misreading a business letter is particularly illuminating (John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997], 11-18).

³² Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 220.

³³ Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 273.

³⁴ Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1971), 11.

³⁵ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 510.

In his reading of the narrative introduction, Tigay finds the Song's purpose to be the prediction and explanation of the disaster that Israel will experience. Specifically, it explains the disaster as the just punishment of the LORD for their behavior. Most commentators who examine the narrative introduction focus on the term "witness," specifically that after Israel forsakes the LORD, the Song will "be a witness for Me [the Lord] against the Israelites" (31:19).³⁶ Again, when the LORD's face is hidden and many troubles come upon Israel, "this song will confront them as a witness" (31:21). Von Rad offers a typical summary, commenting on 31:16-22: "The purpose of writing it down is that this song can rise up later on when Israel shall have broken the covenant as a witness against it."³⁷ McConville sees this introduction as announcing Israel's apostasy and consequent punishment.³⁸ He also states the Song's purpose as "a permanent witness to future generations of the people's tendency to forget the covenant with Yahweh."³⁹ Tigay similarly concludes, "Verse 31:19 characterizes the poem of chapter 32 as a witness to Israel's guilt and God's justice in punishing it."⁴⁰ Brueggemann makes similar comments on 31:19: "The primary purpose of the song, the text notes here, is to fix the blame for Israel's coming suffering. That is, the song establishes Israel's fault for the failed covenant with YHWH and thereby makes clear that YHWH is not at all at fault."⁴¹ Thus we find a consensus interpretation on the purpose assigned to the Song in its narrative introduction: Israel is to blame and rightfully suffering at the hand of the LORD.

And what do commentators find when they look at the Song itself? What purpose can be inferred from it? Brueggemann, crediting Wright, focuses primarily on the first half of the Song in describing its purpose:

Moses' utterance is cast as a judicial case concerning broken covenant. The song establishes the generosity and reliability of YHWH and Israel's constant recalcitrance that refuses to trust and obey YHWH. Thus the song functions as a great theodicy concerning the history of Israel. It insists that all the troubles that have come upon Israel, which are to culminate in the destruction and deportation of 587, are warranted consequences of Israel's covenant violation. Only at the end of the song, in an unexpected turn, does the song move to an affirmation of YHWH's continued commitment to Israel in spite of its infidelity.⁴²

³⁶ All biblical questions are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, 1989.

³⁷ Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 190

³⁸ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 441.

³⁹ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 437. Ultimately, McConville sees the Song as unexpected within Deuteronomy and so gives up on ascertaining its function: "The role of the Song is not easy to define and has often been thought to represent an independent tradition that has been built into Deuteronomy" (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 441). Labeling the Song as belonging to "an independent tradition" seems to be roughly equivalent to saying it is not coherent with Deuteronomy's final form.

⁴⁰ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 506.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 274.

⁴² Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 277. Elsewhere Brueggemann offers this similar summary of the Song, which clearly does it an injustice: "The song is a review of Israel's history that is shown to be a dreary story of endless rebellion and infidelity. Moses already recognizes Israel's sorry tale in this anticipatory articulation."⁴² The Song

Thus Brueggemann aligns his interpretations of the function of the Song as given by its narrative introduction and by the Song in isolation. In both cases he sees the function as being primarily the indictment of Israel and the justification of the LORD's punishment. Other commentators give more than incidental weight to the second half of the Song. In Wright's own analysis, where he interprets the Song as primarily a lawsuit form that has been expanded by hymnic themes drawn from Holy War traditions, he sees it functioning as a tool for teaching and as a confession with an expression of hope and faith in the LORD for deliverance.⁴³ Wiebe interprets it as a "deliberative *riḇ*" that extends the basic lawsuit with an act of lamentation or repentance after the sentencing, a deliberation by the judge, and finally a decision after the deliberation (which he sees in the Song as to revoke the original sentence). He concludes that the Song teaches Israel how to bring about covenant renewal after a period of apostasy, specifically, to teach Israel that the LORD is angry with her, to teach that lamentation and repentance is the proper response, and to suggest that the LORD might prove merciful and restore the covenant.⁴⁴

McConville, who does not directly embrace the *riḇ* genre (which to my mind frees him from being confined to clumsy generic descriptions that distort more than clarify the meaning of the Song), perceives more clearly the function of the Song as a witness. More than just accusing guilty Israel, McConville writes, "the Song is a witness, first of all, to the deep and abiding love of Yahweh for his people." Furthermore, "his love for them is matched only by the treachery of their rejection, and by his jealousy in response, the obverse of his love. This scenario is made to reveal the workings of Yahweh's mind. Any who have wisdom may see it."⁴⁵ Though I disagree with his claim that the Song is primarily about love, the important move that McConville makes relative to other commentators is a shift in what is meant by the Song as "witness." Focusing on the parameters of a lawsuit, most commentators see the Song's purpose as testifying in such a way as to convict Israel of apostasy and to acquit the LORD for his violence toward Israel. But McConville's reading has a broader understanding of "witness," which is similar to the interpretation I offer below: the Song stands as an authoritative, prophetic interpretation of history that disallows contradictory claims.⁴⁶

does not review Israel's history—it does not mention the patriarchs, the exodus, or Sinai. It does not describe "endless" disobedience by Israel but her desertion of the LORD in a single telescoped incident (32:15-18). I would further argue that the story is not "dreary" but one that is consistent with the admonition to "ascribe greatness to our God" (32:3) (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 277).

⁴³ Wright, "Lawsuit of God," 66.

⁴⁴ Wiebe, "Song of Moses," 150-2.

⁴⁵ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 461-2.

⁴⁶ My understanding of the Song's purpose within its canonical context is quite similar to Mendenhall's conclusion from examining the Song in isolation, where he views it as authored by Samuel and reacting to the

Summary

Previous work on the Song has emphasized its disunity with the surrounding narrative framework. Therefore interpretation has focused on the Song in isolation. The form critical approach has found the “lawsuit” (*rib*) genre to be the best starting point for understanding the Song, though the applicability of that genre is questionable at best. The purposes of the Song are seen to include indicting Israel for faithlessness, justifying the LORD’s anger and jealousy, calling Israel to hope, repentance and covenant renewal, and revealing the divine mind. These purposes are generally seen to be at odds with the purpose of the Song as presented in its narrative introduction. In my reading, which focuses more on content than form, there is a considerable unity between the Song and its introduction.

EXEGESIS

My exegesis looks first at the context of the Song, particularly its narrative introduction. I then move to the text of the Song itself.

Context and Narrative Introduction

The Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43) is a poem about Israel’s future, after a time of disloyalty and suffering. It is introduced by a narrative (31:1-30) that reflects on the imminent death of Moses before Israel enters the land. It follows the dramatic covenant renewal of Deut 29-30 where Moses presents Israel with two possible futures: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (30:19-20). His electric exhortation is still ringing in the air—full of hope, excitement, and danger—as chapter 31 begins in a new, somber key with a note of grim reality. Moses says, “I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about” (31:2a). The age of Mosaic leadership is over. Moreover, he continues, “And the LORD has told me, ‘You shall not cross over this Jordan’” (31:2b). Moses’ life does not end in the fullness of *shalom*, but with the frustration of being able to see the land of milk and honey yet not able to touch it. The narrative after the Song closes on this same dark disappointment. The LORD says to Moses, “You shall die there on the mountain...because...you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among

destruction of Shiloh: “It is a prophetic oracle essentially concerned with the interpretation of history past, and appealing for public opinion that would make the future more palatable. It is not a “broken” *rib*, for under the circumstances following the Philistine victory, the only possible and the only necessary course of action was a rejection of the pagan ideologies that disrupted the unity upon which the independence of the tribal villages was absolutely dependent, and a reaffirmation of the Yahwist theology” (Mendenhall, “Samuel’s ‘Broken *Rib*,” 72). Childs has a not dissimilar understanding of its prophetic purpose: “Moses is portrayed as offering a prophetic understanding of history in poetic dress which encompasses both past, present, and future” (Childs, *Intro to the OT as Scripture*, 220).

the Israelites. Although you may view the land from a distance, you shall not enter it—the land that I am giving to the Israelites” (32:50-52). Moses’ exhortation offers life or death to Israel, but the blessed life seems almost beyond hope. One generation has already died without entering the land because of the sin at Kadesh Barnea (1:19-2:16), having narrowly escaped destruction over the golden calf through Moses’ pleas (9:7-10:11). And now Moses himself nears death on the far side of the Jordan.

Can anyone enter the land? Yes, declares Moses, for “the LORD your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as the LORD promised” (31:3). There *is* hope. Joshua is affirmed as Moses’ successor and he is unconditionally assured of success: “It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed” (31:8). Yet the demanding conditionality is not far behind. Moses writes down “this law” and commands its regular, public reading: “Assemble the people...so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law, and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess” (31:12-13). Israel’s proper relationship with the LORD is not automatic, but depends upon hearing the law, obeying it, and properly fearing the LORD. The final clause recapitulates the ominous theme [literally, “all of the days that you live upon the land” (31:13)] for it is unclear whether the days in the land will be many or few.

When Moses and Joshua present themselves in the tent of meeting, the LORD discloses Israel’s future. He speaks with Moses, but Joshua is privy to the secret.

The LORD said to Moses, “Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land in which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. My anger will be kindled against them in that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. In that day they will say, ‘Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?’ On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods. (31:16-18)

The flow of events is clear: Moses’ death, Israel forsaking the LORD and turning to other gods, the LORD’s anger and forsaking of Israel, Israel suffering and recognizing the LORD’s absence. There is no fork in the road in this account, Israel *will* abandon the LORD, the LORD *will* abandon Israel, and Israel *will* suffer. But it is exactly at this point that the text begins to address our question about the covenant curses. Yes, the LORD will become angry. Yes, Israel will suffer. But why? and to what end?

The text takes a strange turn with the conjunctive adverb **ועתה**, which indicates a major conclusion based on all that has come before. Translating more expansively, “[And now therefore, on account of all of this] write this song and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites” (31:19). After the full outworking of Israel’s future disobedience, “this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants” (31:21). The sure knowledge of Israel’s future abandonment of God and covenant does not lead to canceling the gift of the land, nor preventing the terrible and assured disaster, but to the writing of a song. Though Israel will forget the LORD and the covenant, they will remember the Song. This “Song of Moses” is an integral part of the relational dynamic between Israel and the LORD.

But what does it mean for this song to be a “witness” (**עד**)? What is its function? As discussed above, most commentators interpret its function under a legal metaphor: the witness proves Israel’s guilt. This interpretation of 31:19 is reflected in most English translations of **למען תהיה לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל** as “in order that this song may be a witness for me *against* the children of Israel” (emphasis added).⁴⁷ This understanding only fits the first portion of the Song. I use a more general understanding of what it means to be a “witness.”⁴⁸ An illustrative example of this broader understanding is the altar that Reuben, Gad and Manasseh build east of the Jordan (Josh 22:10-34). The other ten tribes assemble to make war against them when they see the altar for they think that the trans-Jordan tribes have already prostituted themselves to other gods. But they defend their altar’s purpose by explaining that they built it as a *witness* for future generations so that it would be impossible for the cis-Jordan tribes to claim that the trans-Jordan tribes have no portion in the LORD:

We said, ‘Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of the LORD in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and offerings of well-being; so that your children may never say to our children in time to come, “You have no portion in the LORD.”’ And we thought, If this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we could say, ‘Look at this copy of the altar of the LORD, which our ancestors made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.’ (Josh 22:26-28)

⁴⁷ Thus, with slight variations, KJV, NIV, NASB, and NRSV. Interestingly, LXX renders it *ἵνα γενηται μοι ἡ ὥδη αὐτή [κατὰ προσωπον μαρτυρουσα / εἰς μαρτυριον] ἐν υἱοῖς Ἰσραηλ* (“in order that this song may [witness to (their) face / witness] for me among the sons of Israel”). The LXX rendering has no sense of “against” but rather “among.” (The two versions represent a significant variation among LXX manuscripts).

⁴⁸ Although the construction **עד ב** usually means “witness against” (e.g., Deut 19:15 and Mal 3:5), as this verse is usually interpreted, both Josh 24:22 and 1 Sam 12:5 use it in the sense I do here: witness before you to falsify any counterclaims. Note that my interpretation actually includes the other as a proper subset, for in a legal context a witness against the accused is one who falsifies any protestations of innocence.

This unused altar was designed as an affirmation of the trans-Jordan tribes' loyalty to the LORD and unity with the tribes who sacrifice at the altar of which it was a copy. It functions as a witness in the sense that it precludes certain claims. By pointing to the altar, future generations would be able to falsify counterclaims. It publicly set certain facts in stone, as it were.

Likewise the Song of Moses is given to be part of the public record of Israel. For those who might want to rewrite the history of Israel's disobedience and the LORD's response to it, the Song holds steady in Israel's collective memory as a witness that cannot be controverted. The LORD is willing to move ahead with bringing Israel into the land, even with the foreknowledge that the plan will fail (in some sense), as long as the Song is there when the failure occurs. And fail it must, "for I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath" (31:21). What the Song will say in that day is discussed below, but its voice will be prophetic and authoritative, interpreting the past and present, and providing insight for moving to a better future.

So Moses, following the LORD's lead, commands that the book of the law be put beside the ark of the covenant as a witness to Israel (31:24-26). He then assembles the leaders (31:28) and the whole assembly of Israel (31:30) and teaches them the Song because he knows that they will surely act corruptly after his death.

The Song

I now turn to the Song itself to see what testimony it will offer to Israel after the tragic events unfold in some future generation.

Point-of-View

The Song presents a story in poetic form. Its story of the LORD's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness is conceptually connected to the narrative introduction through many common themes, including forsaking (31:6, 8, 16, 17, 20; 32:15, 18, 30), inheritance (31:7; 32:8, 9), other gods (31:16, 18, 20; 32:12, 16, 17, 21, 37, 38), anger (31:17, 29; 32:16, 19, 21), the LORD hiding (31:17, 18; 32:20), the LORD consuming (31:17; 32:22), evils and distresses (31:17, 18, 21, 29; 32:23), Israel's corruption (31:29; 32:5), and the LORD feeding Israel (31:20; 32:13-15). But while the narrative speaks from the time before Israel enters the land, the Song speaks from the time of Israel's lowest point under the LORD's punishing hand (cf. 32:39, **רֵאוּ עַתָּה**, "See now!"). While significant portions of Deuteronomy have called Israel to remember her past (e.g., the rebellion and wilderness wanderings in 1:19-2:16; the golden calf in 9:7-10:11), the point-of-view has always looked forward to life in the land. The

Song is presented as a witness to be tucked safely away in Israel's memory until a future day, when in her suffering she recalls the Song and reflects on her downfall.⁴⁹

Content

How does the Song present Israel's history? The first section (vv. 1-6)⁵⁰ contains a prologue (vv. 1-3), a summary of the integrity of the main characters (vv. 4-5), and a questioning reprimand (v. 6). In the prologue, all creation is rhetorically summoned to verify the testimony of the Song (v. 1) and the desired effect of the Song on the hearers is expressed as education (v. 2).⁵¹ As the LORD speaks, heaven and earth will listen in silent agreement,⁵² and the words are meant to settle upon the land like nurturing rain. Brueggemann notes that "Israel lacks the insight and categories through which to understand its true situation," thus the Song has the role of teacher.⁵³ It is for healing and restoration through wise and prophetic teaching. The prologue ends by firmly establishing who the protagonist of this story is. The Song's narrator proclaims in v. 3, "I will proclaim the name of the LORD" and commands Israel as a prophet speaking in her midst: "Ascribe greatness to our God!"

Verses 4-5 polarize the main characters of the story: the LORD is a rock whose work is perfect (תמימ), ways are just (משפּת), who is faithful (אמוּנה), lacking in injustice (עול), who is righteous (צדיק) and upright (ישׁר). Israel could hardly be more different:⁵⁴ corrupt (שחַת), not sons of the LORD (לא בניו), i.e. not like their father), blemished (מוּם), twisted (עקשׁ), and tortuous (פתלתל). This is unapologetic and unexplained theodicy. The Song's witness is that Israel's predicament results from the LORD doing right and Israel doing wrong.

⁴⁹ MacDonald asserts that the Song is a constant warning to drive every generation of Israel to soul-searching, and does not act as a "time bomb" that comes to mind when needed (Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism"* [Tübingen: Paul Mohr Verlag, 2003], 145). This may very well be its function for the community who hold to Deuteronomy as Scripture, but not for the situation pictured in the text. Deut 28 is a warning; the Song is held without understanding until a future date.

⁵⁰ Commentators divide the song in various ways. I agree with the basic divisions of Wright and Wiebe, though I combine some of their stanzas and do not interpret the song according to the imposed form of the lawsuit genre (Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996], 298; Wiebe, "Song of Moses," 128).

⁵¹ McConville points out that vv. 1-2 recall both wisdom and prophecy texts (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 452).

⁵² Tigay notes that ancient and modern scholars discuss various roles for the heaven and earth (cf. Huffmon, "Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," 290-3) but observes that "they are summoned only to hear, and it seems that they are employed as a literary device, functioning as objective onlookers who witness the justice of the poem's charges and the fairness of Israel's punishment" (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 299).

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 278.

⁵⁴ Verse 5 is difficult to interpret so I note the thrust of the main words without reference to the best way to connect them into a coherent thought. (For a fuller treatment, see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 1895], 352 [referenced by McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 448]).

The section closes with a pair of questions: How has Israel repaid the LORD's prior action (v. 6a)? Is the LORD not Israel's father? Both questions demand that Israel compare herself to the LORD. Does the nation bear family resemblance to the LORD? Does she respond in kind to the LORD?

These two questions are left hanging as the Song continues into the second section (vv. 7-18). The narrator speaks with a prophetic voice that authoritatively interprets the past, justifying the general assessments of the LORD and Israel given in vv. 4-5. The first part speaks of the LORD (vv. 7-14). In the days of the distant past (יְמֹת עוֹלָמֹת) the nations were divided amongst their gods,⁵⁵ and Israel became the LORD's own personal portion (חֵלֶק) and inheritance (חֵבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ) (vv. 8-9). This oblique introduction of the gods of other nations introduces the characters to whom Israel will soon prostitute herself.⁵⁶ So Israel rightfully belongs to the LORD, but did the LORD treat Israel properly? Verses 10-14 tell the story of the LORD's extraordinary care for Israel. She passed through the howling wasteland under the LORD's protection,⁵⁷ protected as dearly as he does the pupil of his own eye.⁵⁸ From the horrible wasteland, the LORD brought Israel to the protected high places of the earth, and fed her richly (with curds, milk, choice wheat and grapes) and miraculously (drawing oil and honey from the rocks). The journey from the wilderness clearly implies the continuing journey into the land. In this picture of abundant provision, a foreshadowing comment is included to prepare for Israel's infidelity: "the LORD alone guided him; no foreign god was with him" (v. 12).⁵⁹

The second half of the section traces Israel's response (vv. 15-18). Israel grew grossly fat on the rich things that the LORD provided, and then abandoned him, and even regarded him as a fool (נָבֵל)

⁵⁵ I read the text according to LXX and Qumran, which is recommended by BHS. In agreement with McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 448, the likely explanation for the variant in the MT is that "sons of God" has been changed to "sons of Israel" to deny polytheism. However, the Song is concerned with Israel's abandonment of the LORD for strange and foreign gods, who seem to be introduced at this point. As presented in the Song, Israel's failure is less the pursuit of non-existent gods than the abandonment of her own God. It should also be noted that the division of the nations is done by "the Most High" (Elyon, עֵלְיוֹן) rather than the LORD. McConville cogently argues that this is one and the same God within the strong mono-Yahwistic theology of Deuteronomy (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 454-5).

⁵⁶ Von Rad notes that this portrayal of Israel's election is unique in the OT and noteworthy in the important role given to other heavenly beings beside the LORD (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 196-7).

⁵⁷ LXX and Samaritan Pentateuch read "sustained" while the MT reads "found." If the former, this probably alludes to Israel's safety during the years between Egypt and Canaan. If the latter, it is probably best understood as a metaphorical reference to Israel's vulnerability before the LORD's mighty work on her behalf (cf. Ezek 16:4-6; Hos 9:10). The LORD will soon exploit Israel's vulnerability apart from him by hiding his face from her (v. 20). Von Rad hypothesizes about a 'tradition of the finding' that was pushed aside by the patriarchal and Exodus traditions (von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 197).

⁵⁸ Whether אֵיֶשֶׁן (LXX κορη) refers to the pupil of the eye as the most sensitive and valuable part of the (anthropomorphic) body, or the "apple of his eye" as his most desired object (as usually rendered), Israel is represented as the LORD's treasure.

⁵⁹ The comment sticks out both because of its contrasting content and the truncated rhythm of a single bicolon (each of vv. 10-11, 13-14 contain double bicola).

[piel], often rendered “scorned” or “rejected”). They caused the LORD to be jealous and angry (קנא and כעס, hiphil) with strange [gods] and abominations. Verse 17 repeatedly and creatively emphasizes that Israel turned to strange gods: they sacrificed “to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared.” The fathers and elders can attest to the LORD’s choice of Israel as his portion (v. 7) but know nothing of the gods to whom Israel has turned. Israel’s twisted response to the LORD’s beneficence has been to forget him with a forgetfulness not of oversight but of personal rejection and immoral response (cf. Deut 8:11, 14).⁶⁰ Though Israel obviously violates the first commandment (Deut 5:7; 6:4-5), the Song speaks in terms of Israel personally wronging the LORD rather than a technical violation of a law.

The first two sections both conclude by condemning Israel’s response to the LORD. The third section (vv. 19-26) moves to his response to her neglect. The LORD is angry (כעס, v. 19) with the anger that Israel has caused him (vv. 16, 21). But what expression will the LORD give to his anger? The Song expresses it as both passive and active. Passively, the LORD hides himself from Israel to see what will happen to her without him (v. 20). This hiding is an idiom for the withholding of favor, the favor that saved Israel from perishing in the wasteland long ago.⁶¹ Actively, he will devour with fire (v. 22), heap disasters upon her (v. 23), finish her off with his arrows (v. 23), send pestilence, plague, beasts and serpents against her (v. 24). The agency of the sword (v. 25) is left indeterminate.

The rationale for this violent treatment is given in the tight parallel of verse 21:

A	They made me jealous with what is no god,	הם קנאוני בלא־אל
	B provoked me with their idols.	כעסוני בהבליהם
A’	So I will make them jealous with what is no people,	ואני אקניאם בלא־עם
	B’ with a foolish nation I will provoke them.	בגוי נבל אכעיסם

A and A’ are exact parallels: the LORD is doing exactly what they have done. B and B’ are chiasmic parallels, giving the verse closure and possibly implying closure in the divine-human struggle as well. Israel provokes first, but the LORD gets the final word. The divine violence is provoked by jealousy and anger. Israel has vexed the LORD and the LORD will thus vex Israel. The response is in kind. But whereas Israel provokes with gods who do not exist, the LORD provokes with a nation who wields very real swords.⁶²

⁶⁰ Cf. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 456.

⁶¹ McConville cites S. E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) on the meaning of the idiom (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 457).

⁶² Cf. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 457.

Verse 26 acts as a janus, connecting the third and fourth (vv. 27-42) sections. The LORD turns his attention to the enemy (אויב), adversaries (צריים), and nation (גוי). These are the ones who have wielded the sword against Israel. Though the section is full of vituperation against these people, the focus of the Song is less on them than on the LORD himself. Though the LORD was prepared to destroy Israel (v. 26), he dares not because of the ensuing triumphalism of Israel's enemies. He is unwilling to have them say, "Our hand is triumphant; it was not the LORD who did all this" (v. 27). So the LORD first truncates his violence against Israel, stopping before the breaking point. This point in the story is the time viewpoint of the Song: Israel has been nearly, but not completely, destroyed and the nations are on the brink of declaring their triumph.

The speaker in vv. 28-33 is unclear but should be taken as an interlude from the authoritative narrator.⁶³ The purpose of the interlude is to first indict the nations as equally bad as Israel. Israel is foolish (נבל) and not wise (חכם) (v. 6) and the enemies lack good counsels (עצות), understanding (תבונה) and wisdom (חכם) (vv. 28-29). These words prevent the error of seeing the nations' victory as resulting from a superiority over Israel. Only the LORD is right, true, and wise in this song. The enemies may have thought that their exceptional might caused a thousand Israelites to flee at the sight of two adversaries, but if they had understanding they would realize that this was only because the LORD had delivered Israel into their hands (v. 30). Note that the passive and active aspects of the LORD's violence against Israel come together here. The selling and giving up of Israel seems to echo the LORD's hiding of his face (a passive action), and yet this has put Israel into a super-vulnerable position that seems more like the LORD actively punishing them with unreasonable military loss. In other words, they not only lack supernatural protection but experience supernatural weakness that makes a thousand no match against two.

Verse 31 is spoken by the narrator, but in such a way that he identifies with Israel for he speaks of the LORD as "our Rock." Through this identification there is a note of hope for Israel because she—or at least the Israelite narrator—affirms the LORD in the midst of this difficult story: "their rock is not like our Rock." For an instant, a voice from within Israel is now in harmony with the Song's opening praises of the greatness of the LORD (vv. 3-4). This bravado for Israel's God hints at the beginning of an alignment with the LORD's own viewpoint: He alone is mighty and no one else can

⁶³ Verse 30 is clearly not spoken by the LORD and is best interpreted as the narrator. Its tight connection to vv. 28-29 and v. 31 means that vv. 28-31 are all from the narrator. Verses 32-33 could be either from the LORD or the narrator since they are not absolutely connected to either v. 31 nor v. 34 (which returns to the LORD's first person voice). The interpretation of vv. 32-33 does not depend much upon choosing between the two since either can speak the condemnation of the nations.

compete. Until this moment, Israel has displayed no evidence of such conviction. The next two verses return to lambasting the enemies, likening them to Sodom and Gomorrah, foreshadowing their fate. Only the LORD shines in the Song.

The LORD declares his vengeance and recompense against Israel's enemies (vv. 34-35) and the narrator's voice indicates the resulting reversal of fortune for Israel (v. 36). He will lay the enemies low and vindicate Israel. But in what sense can Israel be vindicated? The entire weight of the Song rests upon destroying Israel, not vindicating her. The verb יָדַן generally refers to judgment, with "vindicate" used in translation when the context implies a positive judgment.⁶⁴ Here it is in parallel with נָחַם (hithpael) which can be translated in a number of ways, but always represents some sort of reversal of a previous course.⁶⁵ The best understanding of the LORD's reversal here is not that his previous judgment of Israel was wrong, but that the time has come to reverse the suffering he has caused Israel.⁶⁶ Indeed the common translation of נָחַם as "have compassion" (on his servants) is misleading because it implies that the LORD looks down upon battered Israel, forgets that he himself has given the beating, and decides this poor people needs patching up. The point of v. 36 is that his perfect, just, faithful and upright (cf. v. 4) judgment now has the opposite effect on Israel, switching from tearing down to building up.⁶⁷ And the trigger for the reversal (signaled by a temporal and causal כִּי) is explicitly given: "when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining." With this merism ("neither bond nor free," cf. 1 Kings 14:10), the Song expresses the totality of Israel's vulnerability. The violence of the LORD is cut short to avoid the triumphalism of the enemies, and it is reversed when Israel reaches the point of utter defenselessness. As Tigay comments, "When they have become totally powerless, so that they could not possibly attribute their salvation to themselves, He will intervene to save them."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Cf. Gen 15:14 as an example of negative judgment.

⁶⁵ E.g., Esau quiets his outrage by planning Jacob's death (Gen 27:40). Jacob refuses the reversal of his mourning over Joseph (Gen 37:35). God will not reverse himself like people do (Num 23:19). The psalmist is relieved in his affliction by remembering his faithfulness to the law (Ps 119:52). The LORD will reverse his wrath against his people (Ezek 5:13). The one remaining instance (Ps 135:14) does not appear to signal a reversal, but directly quotes the passage under consideration and thereby alludes to that situation as a reason to praise the LORD.

⁶⁶ Cf. the same verb and stem in Ezek 5:13.

⁶⁷ Note that the TNIV, in agreement with my reading, revises the earlier NIV from "The LORD will judge his people and have compassion on his servants" to "The LORD will vindicate his people and relent concerning his servants." "Relent" properly marks the LORD's modified course of action without implying either that he had did not formerly care for Israel, or that his former actions were erroneous.

⁶⁸ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 312.

As Israel lies defeated, the LORD asks the universe a searching question about Israel: “Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge?” (v. 37).⁶⁹ The LORD then shifts from the oblique third person to addressing Israel directly and mocks their gods: “Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection!” (v. 38). For a reader familiar with the larger canon, the silence of the strange gods recalls the absence of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:26-29). Israel’s false rocks are as powerless to help them as Baal was to consume the sacrifice with fire. Assuming that the foreign gods (and Israel) are silent, the LORD takes his stand:

See now that I, even I am he,
 There is no god besides me.
 I kill and I make alive;
 I wound and I heal;
 And no one can deliver from My hand. (v. 39)

The concluding adverb עתה is used again (cf. 31:19 above) with the imperative “see.” Israel is commanded to look at what has happened and to draw the right conclusion. They have trusted in what is nothing; they have abandoned him who is everything. The pronoun “I” appears four times in the one verse, and the possessive “my” twice more. The LORD demands that all eyes, all allegiance come to him. The examples of his exclusive power in the second bicolon could be interpreted as not only over life/death and wounding/healing but over all of life from birth to death. But in the context of the Song a more direct interpretation is that the LORD has killed many of Israel and has acted to protect the survivors. (In contrast, he has ruthlessly dispatched with Israel’s enemies). He has dealt a nearly mortal wound to Israel (note the one perfect verb of the four) and he will now bring healing.⁷⁰ No one can interfere with his activity. As the unparalleled fifth line emphasizes, the LORD’s power is the only power that matters for Israel and the nations. The verb “deliver” (נצל) in the fifth line is difficult to translate for it could mean to deliver or rescue from the LORD’s violence, or snatch away from his protective care. In either case it means that none can challenge his power.

⁶⁹ Most commentators agree that vv. 37-39 address Israel with no discussion of alternative views (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 312-3; von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 199; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 459). Brueggemann sees v. 39 as addressing both Israel and the nations (Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 281-2). In Peels’s study of נקם (“vengeance”), he argues at some length that vv. 37-39 address the enemies. His argument is ultimately unconvincing because it (1) disregards that Israel has been trusting in other “rocks”; (2) disregards that “the rock” is parallel to “their gods” where the only other gods referenced directly in the song are the strange gods that Israel has turned to; (3) disregards that the sacrifices of v. 38 have their only antecedent in Israel’s sacrifices to these gods (v. 17), and indeed these faithless unions between Israel and strange gods are the central conflict of the song; and (4) shifts the high-point of the Song (v. 39) to the LORD’s concern for recognition by the nations, which is nowhere else in view, except possibly in v. 43 as discussed below (H.G.L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995], 139-40). It seems clear to me that vv. 37-39 address Israel and vindicate the LORD in their eyes.

⁷⁰ Tigay sees the first pair as being a general assertion and the second as applying to this particular case (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 313).

As the divine speech continues, he is the one who executes justice (גִּזְשָׁפֵט), vengeance (נִקְמָה), and recompense (שָׁלֵם). It is difficult to say who the LORD refers to as “my adversaries” and “those who hate me.” Within the context of the Song, the just LORD (cf. v. 4) has wielded his sword (v. 41) against both Israel and her enemies, though the verbal connections (נִקְמָה in vv. 35, 43; שָׁלֵם in v. 35) seem to indicate that Israel’s enemies are more in view than Israel herself. But it is noteworthy that he does not say *Israel’s* enemies, the only thing that matters is who is for and against the LORD. It is clear that all peoples are liable to the LORD’s violence, whether his allotted inheritance or other nations.

Unfortunately, the final verse (v. 43) is difficult on several levels. On a textual level, Qumran and LXX attest different, longer versions with the primary difference from the MT being the summons to rejoice with Israel going to the heavens and gods rather than the nations.⁷¹ If the MT is preferred, it is difficult to understand why the bloody nations should suddenly rejoice without any note of enlightenment concerning the LORD or receiving any blessing from him. If it is the heavens and gods, as in Qumran and LXX, then there is some closure with the reference to the heavens in v.1 and a restoration of harmony between the LORD and the divine beings mentioned in v. 8 (following Qumran and LXX against the MT in that verse). On a grammatical level, the final clause (וּכְפַר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ) confusingly juxtaposes two nouns with personal suffixes as if to put them (ungrammatically) into construct form. At a higher level, it is unclear what is meant by “cleansing” (כִּפֶּר) his land. Whatever is precisely meant by this atonement, it points to reconciliation with the LORD. This restoration of relationship after disobedience and violence recalls the atoning spear of Phinehas in the incident at Peor (Num 25:1-13).

Logic

I now summarize my reading of the Song. Its point-of-view is a prophetic, interpretive reflection on Israel’s low state, having been defeated by her enemies, with a view to a future restoration for the sake of the LORD’s name. From its setting in Deuteronomy, this will happen in the future. From the point-of-view of the Song, Israel’s defeat has already happened. Its overall logic then flows through its stanzas like this:

1. *Witness and Theodicy* (vv. 1-6). The Song testifies that the LORD has acted rightly toward Israel throughout her history, her present defeat being no exception. Israel is called to listen in this teachable moment to the Song’s interpretation of her story, revelation of the LORD’s mind, and praise of his name.

⁷¹ Cf. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 314, 516-8; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 450.

2. *Benefaction and Rejection* (vv. 7-18). Israel is the LORD's special inheritance and he has provided for her richly. She has responded by abandoning, scorning and provoking him to anger and jealousy.
3. *Talionic Abandonment and Heaped Misfortune* (vv. 19-26). The LORD responds with his own abandoning and provoking Israel to anger and jealousy. This comprises natural disaster and defeat by her enemies.
4. *Reversal at the Last Moment* (vv. 27-42). To counter the triumphalism of Israel's enemies, the LORD stays his hand against Israel and turns his wrath against her enemies. Israel finds that there is no god but the LORD.

THEOLOGY

Following this exegesis of the Song and its narrative introduction, I offer the following theological reflections on the LORD's violence and coercion towards Israel, and related topics.

Witness

I claimed above that the Song functions as a witness by precluding alternative interpretations of Israel's history. So what claims does the Song make? And what possible counterclaims does it refute? The Song makes three broad claims about the past. First, it affirms the LORD's preference for Israel. The Song affirms that the LORD is specially committed to Israel and that preference has not changed (vv. 8-9, 36). The LORD's preference for Israel has resulted in rich blessings of fruitfulness in the land (vv 10-14), for which no other gods can take responsibility (v. 12). Second, it affirms that Israel has failed to properly respond to the LORD's preference and blessings by deserting him and embracing other gods (vv. 15-18). Third, it affirms that the LORD has responded to Israel with nearly all-consuming violence against her. He made her jealous and angry through her defeat at the hands of another nation (v. 21). He caused her to suffer through 'natural' catastrophes (v. 24). But for the LORD's own name's sake he has not completely destroyed Israel (vv. 26-27). The Song then turns from the past to the future and affirms that the LORD will change course and save Israel by defeating her enemies (vv. 35-36). He does this not for her sake but for his own.

What counterclaims does the Song preclude? The possibilities for alternative interpretations of history are endless, but I offer some important contradictory accounts. For example, Israel could claim that her misfortune was due to bad politics (i.e. proper foreign policy could have prevented the enemy's attack), the LORD's weakness before the enemy's gods, or simply bad luck, rather than the active choice of the LORD to cause her suffering. Likewise Israel could look at her good fortune in

surviving the attacks and conclude that this was due to her own strength, resourcefulness, or luck, rather than the LORD's theocentric choice.

The Song also makes a claim about Israel's future, after her narrow survival: her oppressors will find their own disaster soon (v. 35), which will open the possibility (though not assured by the Song) of Israel flourishing again. If this prediction comes to pass, the authority of the Song will be even stronger.⁷² The enigma of verse 43 obscures any other statement about Israel's future that is contained there.

But beyond these specific claims, the overarching witness of the Song is that the LORD has acted rightly throughout Israel's existence as a nation (v. 4), from the past through to the future. Coupled with this is the claim that Israel has not (v. 5), and that her response has been foolish (v. 6). Given the Song's witness, it is difficult for Israel to lift her head in pride or to speak badly of the LORD.

Commentators who limit the witness of the Song to speaking against Israel and proving her guilt in a court of law overlook the richness of the testimony. The witness speaks much more than Israel's guilt. Israel's election is a foundational part of the witness. The Song testifies to the LORD's goodness to Israel in times past. At its center it solemnly declares that the LORD has laid Israel low—in all faithfulness—and relaxed the pressure just at the moment when his dagger broke the skin over her jugular. But why?

Relationship and Reciprocity, Not Law

An important element of the Song's theology is that Israel's offense against the LORD is one of violation of relationship and reciprocity, not of law. The Song does not mention any legal obligations that Israel had toward the LORD, nor anything imposed by commandment upon her. In fact, no explicit external standard is used for judging Israel. Rather, it is the violation of the implicit and presumed rules of relationship and reciprocity that provokes the anger and jealousy of the LORD. These rules are implicit because they are not spelled out in the Song and are presumed because the logic of the Song depends upon the reader's agreement without proof. The logic of the Song depends upon a sense of relational responsibility that flows from elsewhere. The *shema* (cf. Deut 6:1-5) or the first commandment (cf. Deut 5:6-7), for example, would provide good starting points within the

⁷² Tigay comments on the predictive aspect of the Song: "A witness proving that events were foretold prevents their misinterpretation." (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 295). While I agree with the idea that the Song exists to prevent the misinterpretation of events, it is not simply due to it being a (successful) prediction.

Deuteronomic context for explicit statements of what is assumed to be obligatory upon Israel by the Song.

However, the Song is not dependent on such teaching. The logic of the Song calls for Israel's censure based on something more like basic decency.⁷³ It is then misleading to refer to the LORD being angry over Israel's disobedience. Rather, something more like ingratitude or indecency is Israel's crime. The implication is that the morality of the Song may depend more upon understanding ancient near eastern ethics of reciprocity in relationship than on exegesis of the law. The LORD's kindness and faithfulness to Israel has implications for Israel: she has a social obligation to respond faithfully.⁷⁴

But lest the word "relationship" conjure up too many warm feelings about the terms of interaction between the LORD and Israel, it is necessary to remember that the Song portrays the LORD as on the verge of completely destroying Israel (vv. 26-27), thus obviously destroying their relationship.⁷⁵ One must not interpret the relationship between the LORD and Israel as anything approaching peers or friends.

The LORD's Purpose

The purpose of the LORD's violence seems to be reflected in the divine speeches of vv. 20-21 and vv. 37-42. He has been provoked to jealousy and anger, and he will do the same to Israel. It is in his absence from Israel that he will make plain their end apart from him. The LORD refuses to be seen as undifferentiated from the other gods. In positive terms, he demands that Israel acknowledge him as unique and without rival. It seems that Israel can only see this fact at her lowest point, and then only with the aid of the prophetic Song. The LORD taunts them about the illusory security provided by their strange gods: "Where are their gods...? Let them rise up and help you" (vv. 37, 38). His taunt then gives way to his affirmation that he is the only power to be reckoned with (v. 39). Above all else, Israel must hear this word.

What does the LORD mean by making Israel jealous? This theme is sounded in the logical symmetry of v. 21 but is not directly elaborated in the subsequent poetry. The idea of jealousy about

⁷³ In similar fashion, Nathan does not cite the law book to David about the illegality of adultery and murder, but tells a simple story of exploitation to bring David to condemn himself (2 Sam 12:1-5). Likewise the Song does not point to the first commandment, but tells the story of ingratitude.

⁷⁴ The idea of reciprocity in the Greco-Roman world is of increasing interest to New Testament scholars for understanding the ideas of grace and gift. Cf. James R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen: Paul Mohr Verlag, 2003).

⁷⁵ However, this may be an overstatement for throughout Deuteronomy delicate interpretation is required to understand what is meant by the LORD's threat of "destroying" Israel and whether this implies the dissolution of the covenant or some other degree of catastrophe.

another nation's triumph and Israel's defeat recalls a theme from the blessing and curse admonition of chapter 28:

If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. . . . The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. The LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them. . . .

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: . . . Aliens residing among you shall ascend above you higher and higher, while you shall descend lower and lower. They shall lend to you but you shall not lend to them; they shall be the head and you shall be the tail. (28:1, 12-13, 15, 43-44)

Israel grew fat under the LORD's blessing (32:13-15) as the head of nations and has now become the tail. When all is well Israel's worship goes in all directions, but when she is in desperate need her worship is wrested by the LORD to point only toward him. While our culture sees jealousy as a primarily negative attribute, it is central to the LORD's character⁷⁶ (with respect to Israel) and here it is seen serving a positive role for Israel as well. It is her jealousy over the success of her enemies that breaches her walled heart to hear the LORD's, "I, even I am he."

The LORD's action steers a delicate course between indulging Israel's disloyal idolatries and completely annihilating her. Israel is gasping for breath under her strangler's grip and unable to avoid re-evaluating her very foundations. A near-death experience provides a teachable moment for adjusting priorities. But will this be a lasting lesson? Is anything really changed by this violent episode in Israel's history? Surely not, for other violence/grace episodes in Israel's history have not permanently softened Israel's stiff neck, as Deuteronomy clearly attests. The golden calf debacle has been rehearsed (chs. 9-10) as a similar apostasy after a brief absence by Moses. Like in the Song, Israel is affirmed as the LORD's personal inheritance and her survival results from Moses' appeal to the LORD's reputation before the nations (9:26-29). Yet the lesson of the golden calf does not prevent the idolatry predicted by the Song. Furthermore, the LORD is aware that Israel will abandon him after the death of Moses: "I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath." (31:21). So does the Song envision a cyclic pattern of repeated idolatry, divine violence and grace? It seems uncommitted on that point. The closing passages of Deuteronomy juxtapose a number of voices on this question. The LORD admits that he has not given

⁷⁶ Von Rad refers to the centrality of the LORD's zeal/jealousy for Israel, as displayed in the first commandment, as an intolerant claim to exclusive worship that is tightly wed to his love for her. (Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* [trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 208).

Israel the ability to understand (29:4) and that he will circumcise their hearts to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (30:6).⁷⁷ Yet she is still subsequently threatened with the perilous “if you obey” (30:16-18) and exhorted, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...” (30:19).

However, it is possible that the trauma and salvation referred to by the Song, along with its own prophetic and interpretive voice, may trigger a change that means the cycle need not be repeated.⁷⁸ With the hindsight of later writings, a break in the pattern seems possible. Ezra’s prayer of confession captures a moment of contemplation in light of Israel’s return to idolatry after the Babylonian exile and restoration:

From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. (Ezr 9:7-8)

In light of this grace, Ezra is appalled to see Israel turning away from the LORD again. It seems that the interpretation of Israel’s history as contained in the prophetic message of the Song impresses upon Ezra that this time things must be different. It is the devastation of Hiroshima and the Holocaust that inspires the mantra “Never Again.”

Coercion of Loyalty

The Song is often connected to the book of Deuteronomy through the idea of covenant. Following Mendenhall’s popular formal identification of the book as a suzerainty covenant, the Song is seen as a “covenant lawsuit” that results from Israel’s rebellion against her vassal obligations. Without pursuing this point, it is notable that the Song does not mention a covenant at all. In fact, it does not contain any explicit obligations that the LORD put upon Israel. How then does the Song represent the relational history between Israel and the LORD, and the resulting obligation? Israel’s history with the LORD begins with the dividing of nations by the Most High (however this is to be interpreted) and the LORD was allotted Israel as his inherited portion (v. 9). Note that Israel is not represented as having a choice in the matter. After the assignment, the LORD takes his responsibility toward Israel seriously, rescuing her from a barren place and showering her with bounty (vv. 10-12). Again Israel is completely passive,

⁷⁷ This promise is after a predicted exile and restoration. Note that the Song does not refer to exile as part of the LORD’s response to Israel’s disobedience.

⁷⁸ A similar issue surrounds the Flood, where the LORD promises to never repeat the episode but without making clear what has changed in the world, humanity or the LORD himself (Gen 8:20-21).

the recipient of gifts. It is at this point that Israel is indicted because she “grew fat and kicked” and abandoned the LORD (v. 15).

She is then forced to acknowledge the gift giver, at the tip of the sword of that same giver, so that their relationship can be restored. As presented in the Song, she is coerced into this relationship, having not chosen it for herself in the first place and having rejected it in her satiety. She seems to have freewill but in reality the option of rejection is not an option. Her coerced loyalty is extremely unsettling to modern western culture where individual autonomy is one of the highest values. I shall return to this point toward the end of the essay.

Radical Theocentricity

There is no doubt that the LORD is at the center of the Song. Israel is passive except when she kicks against him. The other gods are vaporous mist. The nations are mere brawn that lack understanding. Israel belongs to the LORD (32:8-9). The LORD alone moves with power and perfection. He speaks with self-aggrandizement: “I, even I am he; there is no god besides me” (v. 39). He cares for Israel with loving regard but not in a way that particularly elevates her or ascribes value to her. Her power over the LORD is only that he has the ‘weakness’ of having committed his reputation on her regard for him, and when she disdains him she provokes his anger and jealousy. The LORD’s reaction is surprising when he sees Israel’s strength wasted away under his violence. It is not compassion over her suffering (despite the usual translation of **אָנַח** in v. 36; see exegesis above) that comes out of his mouth but, “Where are their gods?” (v. 37)—words of self-vindication. When the nations see devastated Israel, the LORD is not concerned that they will think him vicious for how he has treated them, but rather that they take credit for it themselves rather than attribute the violence to him. He demands to be known as the one who has devastated Israel. At the end of the Song, he lifts his hand up to heaven to swear, “I will take vengeance on my adversaries, And will repay those who hate me” (v. 41) whether those haters are Israel or Gentiles. When the contest of wills is over, the LORD is the only one left standing.

In Joyce’s study of Ezekiel, he highlights the ‘radical theocentricity’ of the book.⁷⁹ He highlights four motifs that focus the book on the LORD: (1) “I am Yahweh,” (2) “In the sight of the nations,” (3) “For the sake of my name,” and (4) “I will vindicate my holiness.” The first three themes are likewise present in the Song. The first is a focus on the LORD revealing himself (and less on people turning to him). The Song is presented in the same way, with the LORD’s self-proclamation and

⁷⁹ Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), chapter 6.

relatively little attention on whether Israel or the nations embrace that proclamation. The second is the LORD's concern that he be publicly vindicated, which is obvious in his concern that the nations will take credit for Israel's defeat. The third is that his reputation be aligned with his nature. Joyce's comment on that reputation seems appropriate for the Song: "His desire to vindicate his 'name', the primary content of which is, it seems, not his reputation as a compassionate, forgiving or even a just god, but rather his reputation as a powerful deity."⁸⁰ Only the fourth motif of the LORD's holiness is absent from the Song.⁸¹

Schwartz follows a similar course in his understanding of Ezekiel, though with a much darker tone. He identifies a dilemma in Ezekiel that is likewise central to the Song: The LORD is concerned for "the glorification of his name, which cannot be accomplished if they [Israel] are left to their own devices, cannot be accomplished if they are destroyed either."⁸² Schwartz labels this concern over his name as self-centeredness, and reads the restoration of Israel from exile as an ungracious, forced rehabilitation of a people who are reprogrammed into rightfully worshipping him. They live forever in the shame of what they have done. Having been unable to buy Israel's loyalty with gifts, he degradingly punishes her. He is a sexual master, not a loving husband. Schwartz understands Ezekiel to be a "reverse theodicy" that justifies the LORD's choice *not* to destroy Israel when they so fully deserve it.

A consideration of Ezekiel is beyond the scope of this essay, but the radically theocentric character of that book is certainly present in the Song in a similar way. I cannot go so far as Schwartz by ascribing such nefarious purposes to the LORD's actions. So while Schwartz calls him "self-centered," the point my use of the term "theocentric" is that the LORD is a "self" unlike any other. He is the one unique God. Self-centeredness is a psychological pathology that comes from asserting oneself as central to the world when it is not true. Theocentricity is an assertion that the LORD is the maker of the world and therefore truly *is* at the center of everything. The Song makes this point when accusing Israel: "Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought⁸³ you? He has made you and established you" (v. 6). A created thing is ontologically

⁸⁰ Joyce, *Divine Initiative*, 103.

⁸¹ But note that failure to uphold the LORD's holiness among the Israelites is given as the reason for Moses not being permitted to enter the land in the narrative following the Song (32:51).

⁸² Baruch J. Schwartz, "Ezekiel's Dim View of Israel's Restoration," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* (ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 67.

⁸³ קנה can also mean to create, as in Gen 14:19, 22; Ps 139:13. It is translated so by McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 444, 453. The phrase "He has made (עשה) you" is less ambiguous.

subordinate to its creator.⁸⁴ Schwartz's essay is insightful and helpful, especially in highlighting Ezekiel's portrayal of the restoration and differentiating it from Jeremiah's and Isaiah's. However his portrayal of the LORD seems unsympathetic and betrays an unwillingness to engage imaginatively with a foreign worldview. Indeed, commitment to individual autonomy and disregard for theocentricity might be evaluated as a psychological pathology by the Song's author. The whole point of the Song is the uniqueness, centrality and power of the LORD, and the widely ranging results of his commitment to disloyal Israel.

Divine Pain

My ethical consideration of the Song has focused on the LORD's violence and coercion of Israel. How can he be portrayed as perfect, just, faithful, righteous and upright and yet behave like this? It is worth noting that the Song attests that the LORD is responding to Israel in kind:

They made me jealous with what is no god;
Provoked me with their idols.
So I will make them jealous with what is no people;
Provoke them with a foolish nation, (v. 21)

Israel's suffering is the result of the LORD's plan to "make them jealous" and "provoke them [to anger]," which they have already done to him. It is to misunderstand the Song to think that the LORD has gone overboard. There is no hint that the calamities of famine, pestilence, beasts and sword are out of proportion or greater harm than purposed in v. 21. It is certainly true that the modern reader perceives a dreadful lack of proportion, but this may be yet another indication of a sensitivity to violence that simply is not present in the text as historically situated. Or maybe modern culture fails to comprehend the depth of the violation it is to be made jealous and angry. This verse indicates a balance is being struck between whatever Israel has done to the LORD in her disloyalty and the violence that the LORD subsequently does to her. But what has Israel done to him? The historical theological doctrines of impassability (lack of passion) and self-existence (lack of dependence) — which certainly need deep qualification in order to apply to the LORD of the OT—discourage reflection on the "violence" that humanity can inflict upon the LORD. Modern sensibilities tell us that if someone refuses to respond properly to a kindness, just move on and find someone who will. But Israel's disregard seems to have a much more powerful effect on the LORD. Certainly her disregard does not leave him with his strength gone, as he leaves Israel (v. 36). However the Song seems to equate Israel's hurt and destruction to being made jealous and angry, and that she has done the same

⁸⁴ While the Song does not dwell on the LORD as universal creator, he is the creator of Israel and therefore legitimately able to call himself to her center. However his universality is still plain throughout the Song in the way he relates to the nations and the unresponsive strange gods.

thing to the LORD. Though it is difficult to envision, and the Song offers no helpful metaphor, it presents Israel as having done something seriously wrong to him so that the awful violence she then experiences is somehow comparable. The LORD has already experienced something like what he does to Israel. Such an argument does not legitimate immoral action, but the difficulty of grasping the idea gives a clue as to where modern thinking is disconnected from the worldview of the Song.

Disregard of Other Nations

It is worth noting that there is little or no regard for the Gentile nations mentioned in the Song. They are “no people” who will be used to make Israel jealous (v. 21). They are simply an instrument of the LORD’s will for Israel. The personhood of their citizenry and value as the LORD’s creation are absent from the Israel-focused Song. This lack of compassion for non-Israelites is troubling, yet it is reflective of the purpose of the Song in speaking to the relationship between Israel and the LORD, and not his universal dominion. McConville discusses the larger problem of Deuteronomy’s lack of balance, especially with respect to the problem of holy war against the Canaanites: “If Deuteronomy is strong on this topic of [the purity of true] religion, perhaps it may be conceded that in some sense it is deficient on the other side of the tension, for it does not in itself reveal the love of God for all humanity.”⁸⁵ I agree with him that the presentation of the LORD’s “abuse” of the nations is troubling, but that Deuteronomy—and even more so, the Song—cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the canon. The topics of holy war and the LORD’s relationship with non-Israelites are vitally important. This essay is part of a larger first step toward understanding the more troubling qualities of the LORD by starting with Israel as the primary focus of human interest in the OT before engaging the issues presented by wider humanity.

CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING

Moberly advises, “Questions of how to understand the Bible in its own right, of how to understand the Bible in terms of contemporary categories, and of how to relate these perspectives are *the* questions of biblical interpretation.”⁸⁶ This essay has focused on the first step of this program: understanding the Song of Moses in its own terms as it relates the LORD’s violence toward Israel. In this closing section, I briefly sketch the difficulties with the second step: understanding this text and this subject in contemporary categories. In particular, I see two deep cultural problems. First, there are few

⁸⁵ J. Gordon McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 143.

⁸⁶ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 76 (emphasis original).

contemporary human-human relationships that connect analogically to the LORD's relationship with Israel. Second, there is a cultural rejection of violence and coercion. I treat each in turn.

The Lack of Appropriate Relational Metaphors

Concerning relational metaphors, the OT uses culturally relevant metaphorical language to communicate realities of the LORD in human terms to the community of faith who read it as Scripture. In terms of relationship with his people, he is portrayed variously as father, mother, husband, king, teacher, lord, master, etc. Within the limits of metaphor, these relational terms convey important characteristics of the LORD's relationship with his people through analogy with the known character of the human-human relationships.⁸⁷ But apart from the literary problem of discerning the intended similarities, there is a historical problem with understanding the relational metaphors. As culture changes so do relational roles, even if the labels remain constant. Obviously it cannot be assumed that an English father-son relationship is at all the same as an ancient Israelite one. Certain relational roles disappear from a culture entirely, e.g. "master-slave" for the Western world. This problem is not limited to texts that use the relational labels, for the portrayal of the LORD and Israel may reflect the author's cultural understanding of a father-son relationship without explicitly saying so.

In my understanding of the Song, the relationship between the LORD and Israel is one with a great disparity in power between the parties, where the powerful is morally affirmed for using coercive violence against the weaker, where the weaker has no choice in being morally obligated to the powerful, and where the weaker is disallowed from cutting off the relationship. It is not stretching things too far to suggest that the LORD *owns* Israel. These relational qualities seem to resonate with ancient ideas of king-subject, father-son, teacher-student, husband-wife, and master-slave/servant relationships. However, contemporary ethical sensitivities find little place for such dynamics. Our democratic governments are chosen by the people; the leaders are from the people; they exist for the good of the people; and they can be replaced if the people disagree with their activities. There is no king with unassailable authority over the land. Parents have significant sway over their children's lives but violence and coercion are limited by law, condemned by modern developmental psychology, and culturally shameful. Teachers are limited in the tools they may use to maintain order in the classroom, much less to mold the thinking of their students beyond carefully controlled curricula. Husbands and wives routinely enter into mutually agreeable contractual marriages between equal parties who each maintain the right to dissolve the union according to personal preference. Slavery of all sorts is

⁸⁷ Cf. Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: Images and Mystery in Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

outlawed.⁸⁸ Employers and employees have carefully balanced rights and responsibilities that prevent either from having an advantage over the other. For example, though an employer has tremendous power over an employee, an employee can quit at any time and leave the employer in a bind, though an employer cannot discharge an employee without cause. In short, our culture disallows the owning of a person.

Our culture, in its (understandable) fear of the abuse of power, has methodically re-engineered its relational possibilities to eliminate the very characteristics that we find to be troubling in the OT's portrayal of the relationship between the LORD and his people. The present people of faith simply cannot understand the OT's depiction of the LORD in terms of the present cultural roles of father, husband, employer, teacher, or president. The metaphors are either too tenuous to bear the burden of analogy or just plain wrong.

The problem is not resolved easily through historical sensitivity. For no matter how much one studies the ancient near eastern roles of king, husband and master, the tension between "how they did it" and "what I know to be right through my culture" remains. Moberly urges us to understand the Bible in terms of contemporary categories, but what is to be done when the full range of contemporary categories is too narrow for the task? There is a need for serious cultural reflection in order to find the best possible analogies if the biblical text is to be comprehensible.⁸⁹

The Rejection of Violence and Coercion

As noted at the beginning of this essay, our culture largely rejects violence and coercion as moral possibilities. This is particularly true in personal relationships. There are extreme occasions when police and prisons need to coerce criminals, or when armies need to employ the violence of warfare. However, even in these rare cases violence and coercion are not personal but abstract, dispassionate and methodical. The police officer uses force only within the limits of carefully developed guidelines, and is liable to the court's second-by-second reconstruction of events if excessive violence is suspected. Judges and juries make decisions on imprisonment of offenders, but impersonally according to laws that are expressed in terms that would ideally yield identical verdicts regardless of the individuals sitting at the bench or in the jury box. Warfare unfortunately requires certain soldiers to be programmed for hand-to-hand and eye-to-eye combat, but ideally smart bombs are dropped from

⁸⁸ Even certain *prima facie* innocuous employment arrangements that would obligate someone to perform a service for an employer are outlawed because of the appearance of indentured servitude.

⁸⁹ I am reminded of Richardson's struggle to find cultural connection points between the NT gospel and a people who celebrated treachery and saw Judas as the hero of the story. His belief is that adequate cultural connections are always present but may have to be found in very unusual places (Don Richardson, *Peace Child* [Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1975]).

high altitude to forward political goals decided by considered congressional debate. Violence is acceptable in the margins of our society as long as it is not “personal.” In the personal domains of marriage, family, friendship, employment and school, violence and coercion have no place.⁹⁰

In our society only the state can wield coercive power, and this power is only rarely used to coerce loyalty to another. A child is not coerced into caring for a parent. Coercion into marriage is illegal. At least in the United States, rejection of the state by burning the flag is protected free speech. Even further, commitments of loyalty may be rescinded. Marriage vows can be rescinded via divorce. Employment obligations can be ended by either the employee quitting or the company laying off the employee. The OT has no such trouble with impressing obligations upon someone. People could be bought and sold as slaves. Kings held their subjects’ lives in their hands. And most importantly, the LORD imposed obligations upon Israel. She does not have to agree to them at the outset (though she does: Exod 19:7-8; 24:3), nor does she seem to have the right to rescind them at a later date. Her obligation to the LORD is imposed and ultimately coerced through power.

Upon reflection I find at least two cases where loyalty is coerced by threat of force in the contemporary west. Parents are obliged to care for their child (though they have the option of giving the child up for adoption) and soldiers are obliged to fight, even when the battle or war is lost.⁹¹ In both cases, the state is willing to use coercion to force the fulfillment of relational obligations through laws against child neglect and desertion. But the Song’s assumption that the LORD can place Israel under obligation to him without her agreement and with no possibility for withdrawal is deeply at odds with the modern western ideal of individual autonomy. From such a vantage point, such coercion is as morally deficient as the violence the LORD uses to enforce that loyalty. However it is completely morally upright in the eyes of the text.

C. S. Lewis writes that our culture misunderstands the full depth of the idea of love through an overemphasis on kindness: “For about a hundred years we have so concentrated on one of the virtues—’kindness’ or mercy—that most of us do not feel anything except kindness to be really good or anything but cruelty to be really bad.”⁹² He compares our culture with older ages that excelled beyond us in the virtues of courage or chastity, but were also cruel.⁹³ The implication is that we have achieved a certain high level of kindness, mercy or humaneness, but we symmetrically fail at being

⁹⁰ Violence and coercion in childrearing is one limited exception, as noted earlier.

⁹¹ The theme of coercing the ill-fated Confederate soldiers of the Civil War in the United States to not desert plays a major role in the 2003 movie “Cold Mountain.”

⁹² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Collier Books, 1978), 56.

⁹³ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 64.

courageous and chaste. This claim may be difficult to prove, but it raises the possibility that our culture may not simply be more advanced and plainly better than the culture that praises the violence of the LORD. Perhaps we are just skewed from it in a way that sees some virtues more clearly and is blind to others. Given the failure of the modernist claims of unassailable moral progress, such a possibility must be admitted. We are thus left with the problem of critiquing the very culture that blinds our eyes to its faults. But it may just be that the biblical text, with its unapologetic portrayal of the God who both supersedes that culture and is censured by it, provides a vantage point for viewing our culture from outside.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with another story-like quotation from C. S. Lewis: “Most of us have at times felt a secret sympathy with the dying farmer who replied to the Vicar’s dissertation on repentance by asking ‘What harm have I ever done *Him*?’ There is the real rub. The worst we have done to God is to leave Him alone—why can’t He return the compliment? Why not live and let live? What call has He, of all beings, to be ‘angry’?”⁹⁴ But if the OT portrayal is to be taken with any seriousness as Scripture that provides glimpses into the divine, then he most certainly has been, and most probably still is angry. And apparently being asked to be left alone, to have the autonomy that is so prized by our culture, to be free to worship whom and what we please, is not an option that he is willing to entertain. It is an option that leads to the LORD’s violence and coercion. And regardless of our culture’s confidence that love—as kindness—is both the pathway to all that pleases the LORD and the road he always chooses himself for us, Scripture has a very different message. The LORD is slow to anger, but slowness does not preclude anger’s eventual appearance. He is intentionally portrayed as dangerous, passionate, destructive, potent, and unpredictable.⁹⁵ This is not the sum of his character, but it is a substantial part. If we stretch ourselves far enough, we might be able to grasp that these qualities lead not to apology or condemnation but praise:

For I will proclaim the name of the LORD;
Ascribe greatness to our God!
The Rock, his work is perfect,
And all his ways are just;
A faithful God, without deceit,
Just and upright is he. (Deut 32:3-4)

⁹⁴ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 58 (emphasis original).

⁹⁵ Cf. Bruce Edward Baloian, *Anger in the Old Testament* (New York: Peter Lang Pub Inc, 1992), 158.

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