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Deuteronomy 4 and the Art of Homiletics in the Bible

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Although Deuteronomy is commonly described as Moses' farewell speech, it actually consists of several speeches, as indicated by the various headings in the book. Depending on how we read the headings, they imply that there are five to seven speeches (see the *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, p. xii, for details). In fact, the סדר עולם goes further.¹ It says that Moses expounded (פרש) the entire Torah, i.e., delivered the speeches of Deuteronomy (ending at 31:14, "הן קרבו ימין למות" – the time is drawing near for you to die), over a period of 36 days, from 1 Shevat through 6 Adar. This implies that Deuteronomy contains 36 days' worth of speeches – in other words, that it consisted of units that were smaller and more numerous than what is implied by the headings in the book. And indeed, if we examine the major speeches closely, it becomes apparent that they do indeed consist of shorter units that have no obvious connection to each other. Frequently, after a few verses, the text changes topics. I want to argue that this is because Deuteronomy is a collection of sermon abstracts or précis.

I would like to illustrate this phenomenon primarily from the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy. The chapter consists of four basic sections:

- A. vv. 1-4: The בעל-פעור incident, which shows the importance of observing God's laws; the laws are represented here by the prohibition of idolatry.
- B. vv. 5-8: The incomparability of the laws (and of Israel's access to God) shows the importance of obeying.
- C. vv. 9-20: The nonvisual experience at Sinai shows the need for an aniconic religion.

D. vv. 4:32-40: The incomparability of the exodus and the revelation at Sinai show that the Lord alone is God, which shows that Israel should obey Him.

I want to argue that these four sections look like brief sermons, teachings, or précis of such that were originally composed for oral delivery and at least some of which were originally separate from each other (whether composed by the same author or different ones). Note, first, that both vv. 1 and 5 have introductory formulas (שמע in v. 1 and ראה in v. 5). More importantly, most of these sections are not inherently connected to each other and are largely oblivious of each other. They could easily be moved elsewhere without the reader feeling that something is missing from their present context or that they are extraneous in their new context. Frequently, after a few verses, the text seems to have reached a conclusion and then changes topics, sometimes without any transition. Note, for example, the disjunction between sections A and B (4:1-4 and 5-8). In section A, the consequences of the בעל-פעור incident demonstrate that observing the laws, particularly the law prohibiting worship of other gods, is essential so that Israel may live to enter the promised land. Then, in section B, the argument that observance is a matter of life and death is dropped and replaced by the argument that Israel should observe the laws because they are uniquely just and uniquely effective in securing God's closeness, and that following them will therefore demonstrate Israel's wisdom to the nations.

The two arguments are of very different character. The first, rooted in an experience in which gentiles lured Israelites to sin (Numbers 25), is historical and is focused on a specific law. The second, unrelated to the first, refers to all the laws. It appeals to national pride and sounds almost contemporary in its contention that the Torah is uniquely just and will win Israel the respect of the gentiles, who are portrayed positively as appreciating justice and prepared to give Israel credit. Each of these sections is brief and skeletal and virtually begs for elaboration, suggesting that they are outlines or précis of longer speeches.

Section C of this chapter is a lengthy argument for obeying the prohibition of idols. It shows that this prohibition is based on the exodus and particularly on the encounter with God at Horeb, and it backs up the prohibition with the threat of exile. Section D is an argument for monotheism: it argues on the basis of the exodus and Horeb experiences that there is no other God but the Lord and that His laws should therefore be obeyed.

Logically each of these sections is self-contained. They do not refer to each other or rely on each other for their effectiveness and, in fact, any of them could be removed without the others losing their force.

The apparent separateness of these sections provides a first clue in identifying just what is going on. This happens often in one kind of Jewish literature, and that is *מדרש*. The *מדרשים* are collections of sermons from talmudic times interpreting verses of the Bible. To be more precise, they are not full sermons but *précis* of sermons. Sometimes several different sermons are given based on the same verse of the Bible. Sometimes, after each sermon or *précis*, the next one begins with the phrase *דבר אחר*, “another thing,” another interpretation. The series of brief speeches in Deuteronomy is like these *מדרשים*, except that it does not tip us off by using the phrase *דבר אחר* between the speeches.

I believe that the similarity of Deuteronomy to the *מדרש* is no accident. Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons or sermon *précis*. Its rhetorical style is well suited to oral presentation. Its sentences are long and flowing. They are marked by assonance, key words, and stereotyped expressions – all valued features of oral presentation. Themes are repeated frequently, a practice that enables listeners in a large audience to catch everything that is said. Even the laws are lucid and free of technical details, intelligible to all ranks of the people. And instead of adopting the impersonal style typical of law codes, Deuteronomy, more than any other book in the Torah, addresses the laws directly to people.

A major difference between Deuteronomy and rabbinic *מדרש* is that in the *מדרש*, a text, a biblical verse, is the premise on which the message is based; in Deuteronomy it is instead an historical event (such as the exodus, Horeb, the manna, the Golden Calf and *בעל-פעור* incidents), the topography of the promised land, the justice of God's laws, and other phenomena; these play a role analogous to that of biblical verses in midrash. To illustrate, let us look at the way Deuteronomy treats some events that were related earlier, in Exodus. In Exodus, the events are presented in narrative form; in Deuteronomy they are not so much narrated as they are alluded to in a homiletic fashion, where the focus is not on the details of what happened but on the lesson to be derived from it. Consider for a moment the account of the manna in Deuteronomy 8:1-5 as contrasted with the full narrative in Exodus 16. The event narrated in Exodus 16 is the premise of Deuteronomy 8's homiletic elaboration.

The same relationship exists between Deuteronomy 4 and its references to the assembly at Mt. Sinai narrated in Exodus 19-20. The events at Sinai, and particularly the facts that Israel heard God speak from within the fire, as no other nation ever did, and that no visual image of God was seen there, are the “text” which serves as the premise of the sermon in Deuteronomy 4 urging the truth of monotheism and the prohibition of making idols and worshiping the heavenly bodies. Deuteronomy's interpretations of these events are a kind of forerunner of the homiletic exposition of biblical verses in the *מדרשים*.

Despite their disparate character, the four sections of Deuteronomy 4 are held together as a unit by a frame in which Moses urges obedience to God's laws so that Israel may live to occupy the land and remain in it indefinitely (vv. 1 [from section A], 40 [from section D]). This message is echoed within the chapter by a warning that failure to observe the law against idols will lead to banishment from the land (vv. 23-28 [from section C]). The four units of the chapter do have numerous features in common, both thematic and verbal, which reflect the sermonic, didactic character of Deuteronomy. In all four, Moses refers to the laws that he is teaching or commanding and to the land that Israel is about to enter (vv. 1, 5, 14, 21, 26, 40). In three of the units, Moses bases his argument on history. In A, he argues that history shows the consequences of obeying or disobeying the commandments. In C, he argues that history justifies the prohibition of images. In D, he argues that history proves that the Lord is the only true God.

Each unit opens with an appeal to the mind: “hear,” “see,” “do not forget,” and “inquire” (vv. 1, 5, 9, 32). The themes of seeing and hearing – the senses through which Israel experienced history – are mentioned throughout, as are teaching and learning (*למד* – vv. 1, 5, 10, 14), knowing and making known (*ידע* – vv. 9, 35, 39), forgetting, wisdom and understanding.

In each unit Moses lends immediacy to his words by referring to *היום* “today,” “this day,” “as is now the case”). B and D show that Israel and its laws are unparalleled among the nations and the Lord is unparalleled among the Gods. C and D refer to the theophany at Horeb and the exodus, and both speak of heaven and earth. The four units of the chapter are arranged in reverse chronological order, based on their allusions to the past: A alludes to the recent incident at Peor (v. 3), C to the theophany at Horeb, the exodus, and the division of nations (vv. 10-14, 19-20), and D to the creation and the

patriarchs as well as the exodus and Horeb (vv. 32-34, 36-37) (the order within each unit is not chronological).

I do not believe that these phenomena that lend unity and design to the chapter are strong enough to argue that the units of which it is comprised were originally composed to stand with each other as they now do. These phenomena consist primarily of simple patterns of arrangement (chiasmus, a frame, reverse chronological order) that are not integral to the contents of the units, and of common Deuteronomic themes and formulas. They do not overcome the disjointed impression that the chapter makes on the reader and that suggests that it consists of originally separate units, many of them sermon précis, brought together by a compiler who arranged them in their present patterns.

If the individual units of the chapter are sermons or précis of sermons, the chapter as a whole is like a section of a homiletic *מדרש* in both content and structure. Homiletic *מדרשים*, such as *ויקרא רבה*, likewise contain individual small units – explanations of verses or sermons about them – gathered together with other such units into larger complexes. In the *מדרשים* these smaller units are not preserved in full but in brief form, as précis or abstracts. The compilers who gathered the précis into larger units did their work with literary care. They did not string their materials together mechanically but artistically, arranging them in symmetrical or chiasmic patterns or by means of assonant key words and roots.²

Some of the legal matter in Deuteronomy is also presented in a homiletic manner. Not only does the book present laws, it frequently adds motive clauses that explain the laws and urge the reasons for obeying them and the principles that they express.³ The four collections of law in the Torah all have some motive clauses, but whereas the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:19-23:33) adds motive clauses to 16 percent of its laws, and the priestly sections of the Torah add them to 20 percent, Deuteronomy employs them in fully 50 percent of its laws. Only one other section of the Torah uses motive clauses as frequently, namely the so-called Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-25, which uses them in 51 percent of its laws. A good example of this style is the twelfth chapter of Deuteronomy, which contains the laws limiting sacrificial worship to a single sanctuary. These laws consist of three basic provisions: Canaanite places of worship must be destroyed; Israel may perform sacrificial worship at only one, chosen place; and non-sacrificial slaughter is permitted to those living at a distance from the chosen place. That the chapter requires 29 verses to state these rules is because it devotes much

attention to repeating, clarifying, exhorting, cautioning, and explaining when the rules will come into effect. From a strictly legal point of view much of this is unnecessary, as shown by the fact that the Temple Scroll from Qumran conveys the essence of the chapter in eleven short lines.

This homiletic treatment of the laws is most fully developed in the laws about the cancellation of debts and the manumission of bondsmen in chapter 15. These two laws cover a span of eighteen verses, but only eight verses actually consist of laws (1-3, 12-14, 16-17). Two more verses contain an unenforceable exhortation not to refuse loans to the needy (vv. 7-8), and the remaining eight verses of the chapter contain motive clauses that aim to persuade the public to observe the laws and the exhortation because they are fair and reasonable or because God will reward those who observe and punish those who do not (vv. 4-6, 9-11, 15, 18-19). The homiletic character of Deuteronomy is most evident in this appeal to the reason of its audience. It seeks to make the people understand the reasons for the laws and the benefits they will confer so that the people will observe the laws willingly and out of conviction.

Deuteronomy thus responds to the needs of an age that was much like our own. If critical theory is correct and Deuteronomy belongs to the period between the late eighth and late seventh centuries B.C.E., it is the product of a cosmopolitan age in which Israelites had been exposed to an attractive international culture, that of the ascendant Assyrian Empire. They saw that there were alternatives to their own culture, and many of the Israelites needed to be convinced of the value and benefits of their own if they were to continue to adhere to it. The sermonic character of the book is designed to meet that challenge.

Deuteronomy is thus one of the oldest known collections of literary sermons.⁴ The sermon is one of the greatest and most influential Jewish forms of expression, a form that is at once religious, intellectual, and artistic. It is a form that still retains its potency and that some observers believe is the single most influential source of Jewish knowledge for most Jews today. Apart from the fact that the premises of the sermons in Deuteronomy are facts and events rather than texts, the book is comparable to a collection of midrashic sermons. As such it indicates that the rabbinic art of preaching was practiced in biblical times, when it was attributed to none other than Moses, our greatest teacher.

NOTES

1. סדר עולם רבה 10 (ed. Ratner p. 41, re: Deut. 1:3).
2. The redactional techniques of the מדרשים are the subject of lively discussion. See, for example, J. Heinemann, "Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971):141-150; "The Art of Composition in Midrash Vayikra Rabbah," *הספורה* 2 (1971): 808-34; R. Hammer, "Section 38 of Sifre Deuteronomy: An Example of the Use of Independent Sources to Create a Literary Unit," *HUCA* 50 (1979):165-78; idem, "Complex Forms of Aggadah and their Influence on Content," *PAAJR* 48 (1981):183-206; Steven D. Fraade, "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23): How Conscious the Composition?" *HUCA* 54 (1983):245-301; J. Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); further bibliography cited by David M. Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986):123 n. 7.
3. For the following statistics, see Rifat Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law. Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 45. (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1980).
4. This phrase is borrowed from Heinemann, who used it to describe the final stage in the redaction of homiletic מדרשים, as he understood the process.

Who Knows One? A Workshop on the Music of Passover

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The songs chanted at the Passover סדר provide a wonderful example of the evolving nature of Jewish music. The סדר, one of the most universally observed Jewish rituals, is a home-based ceremony with a near-infinite variety of permutations borne of the multitude of "customs" with which the proceedings have been endowed by Jews throughout two thousands years of Diaspora experience. Because Jewish music (like other aspects of Jewish life and heritage) has always borrowed from the music of the surrounding culture, a wide range of music literature represents "tradition" to its adherents. In addition, rather than finding "experts" at most סדרים who can authoritatively (if orally) transmit these traditions to successive generations, we find, instead, gatherings of randomly collected family members and their friends, all eager to preserve "their" tunes. Ashkenazi families marry into Sephardic and Oriental clans; Eastern European Jews make friends with their brethren from Germany; singers with excellent voices and accurate musical memories mingle with others whose loud and enthusiastic chanting does little to mask their inability to carry a tune. The resulting jumble results in coincident, corrupted versions of a once-remembered melody – and another contribution to the growing body of Jewish "folk" music associated with the Passover holiday. Adding to the cacophony is the shrinking of the "global village" and the accessibility of genuinely "foreign" tunes eagerly adopted by festival celebrants tired of "the same old songs." It comes as no surprise, therefore, that there is more than one way to sing *Who Knows One* – as well as every other text of the Haggadah. This workshop sought to heighten the participants' sensitivity to the natural evolution that is taking place