

THE COVENANTAL CONTOURS OF PRAISE

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Biblical history records the Red Sea "Song of Moses" (Ex. 15:1ff) as the earliest example of Israel's "corporate worship." Up until that time the people of Israel have been portrayed as a group of slaves who were reluctant to believe Moses and who feared death from Pharaoh before the defeat of the Egyptian army. But on the east side of Yam Suph Israel feared YHWH and believed Moses (Ex. 14:31). This led to an exultant victory song on Israel's part.

This essay will explore how the covenant which YHWH made with Israel at Horeb and renewed on the plains of Moab is the unique setting and theological source for the praise and joy which Israel should experience. Several Deuteronomy passages will be investigated, and connections with the expressions in the Psalms (and elsewhere) will be suggested.

This is certainly not to say that covenant and praise as such are unique in Israel. Examples of Hittite and Assyrian treaty covenants exist, as well as many examples of non-Israelite liturgical texts and cultic literature. What is being suggested in this essay is that with the adoption of a political treaty format, the praise of YHWH's people Israel is shaped in a certain context, a context to which even the canonical form of the Psalter seems to testify. YHWH has condescended to relate to a small and stubborn people by means of a covenant, and in this situation Israel comes to know him and themselves in a way that gives rise to praise.

*Passages in Deuteronomy**Deuteronomy 10:21*

The passage at which we begin is Deuteronomy 10:21, "He is your praise; He is your God. . . [hu' tehillatka wehu' 'eloheyka]." This God is the One Israel must praise, to whom should be given glory. The operative word here is *tehillah* which means a hymn (of praise, often sung).¹ YHWH God is Israel's "hymn," her psalm. In the context (10:12-22) of 10:21 Israel hears that the Lord of every level of heaven (10:14), the God of gods, (10:17), has chosen Israel (s ancestors) in love and affection (10:15) (*chasaq YHWH le'ahabah 'otam wayyibchar'*). This calls for a circumcised heart and an obedience to this God who looks out for those members of society who are often abused. Israel is called upon to fear YHWH (10:20) who has blessed Israel in such a way that she is now great in number (10:22).

This passage reveals several ideas which are interspersed throughout Deuteronomy. The great God YHWH has chosen Israel and has pressed his blessing upon this people. This lays claim to Israel's response of fear and obedience. This electing God is Israel's (song of) praise.

The various elements of this passage constitute the parts of the covenant with which Deuteronomy confronts Israel. There is the identification of the treaty-maker, a recall of past historical dealings, a call to keep certain laws and stipulations, and the vassal's response. In the words, "He is your praise," there is *in nuce* a dimension of the response which Israel should give to YHWH. His covenant evokes praise directed to him.

Deuteronomy in several passages explicates the great commandment that there is only one God--YHWH--and he must receive the total devotion of Israel. This is the only redeeming God whom Israel knows and who knows Israel. He is unique over the idols which, though seen in images, are never heard speaking. YHWH, though never seen, is heard speaking from the fire and the cloud. So Israel must have no other gods, and she must destroy pagan shrines and

symbols.

Deuteronomy 4:7-8

This chapter serves as a hinge between the historical prologue in Deuteronomy 1:6ff and the statutes and commandments sections in Deuteronomy 5-26. Israel should keep God's decrees and laws for a number of reasons, one of which is that the nations, upon hearing of the laws, will be deeply impressed with Israel.² Then the biblical writer in Deuteronomy 4:7-8 goes into an aside which is something of an "incipient doxology." It is a comparison between Israel and other nations, a comparison that is made in terms of what each one has (received). Textually it reads like this: *ki mi-goy gadol 'asher-lo 'elohim qerobim 'elaw; kaYHWH 'eloheyenu bekol-qar'enu 'elaw (4:7); umi goy gadol 'asher-lo chuqim umishpatim tsaddiqim; kekol hattorah hazz'ot.*

On two counts Israel is able to make a "claim to fame." YHWH is a God near by, and Israel's torah is composed of such righteous statutes and ordinances. YHWH and "this torah" are incomparable, and Israel is the people who have this God and "this torah." The implication one could conceivably draw from this is that Israel is herself incomparable. Of course, Deuteronomy 7:6b-9 and 9:4ff remind the reader that Israel possesses nothing inherently that warrants her having what she now possesses. To have YHWH and this torah is a gift of grace. But it is a gift now experienced in the covenant made at Horeb and renewed on the plains of Moab. Such a realization should and does lead to praise and worship.

Here it is important to point out that this covenant is often denominated under the term *torah*. On the plains of Moab Moses has set about to clarify "this torah" (1:5). But what follows is not a legal code, but a historical account of Israel's journey from Horeb, a journey directed by YHWH and characterized by Israel's murmuring and rebellion.

Brevard Childs notes the surprise the reader often experiences after Deuteronomy 1:5 when the explanation or clarification of "this torah" is initiated with a history of Israel

after the covenant making at Horeb. Is this historical material out of place? Not at all, in that the "selection of narrative material has been carefully chosen to describe the historical situation and to ground the theological argument which will occupy the rest of the book."³ Deuteronomy 4 shows why the historical review has been important. Israel's faith and practice are grounded in this God who has been dealing with this often rebellious people. The exhortations are based on this foundation in God's covenantal faithfulness. Israel has a covenant from YHWH who is close and whose *torah* is righteous and also close (Deut. 30:11-14). This sets the stage theologically for Israel's praise to God.⁴

Deuteronomy 4:32-40

This passage elaborates on the incomparability of YHWH. Throughout all time and space, what has happened to Israel is unique (Deut. 4:32). To see YHWH is fatal, and even hearing him is risky (cf. Gen. 16:13; 32:30; Ex. 3:6; 19:21; 33:20; etc.). But Israel has heard him speak out of fire and has lived. He is so close (a consuming fire), yet Israel is not consumed, but she is disciplined (Deut. 4:36).

Furthermore, by great signs and wonders YHWH has delivered his people from Egypt, and Israel has witnessed this. No other people has experienced this, thus making Israel unique. Through "this *torah*" Israel hears of this deliverance again, and through the questions of incomparability (Deut. 4:33-34) Israel can be drawn toward and into a spiritually unique kind of praise because her God and her experience are both unique. If one doubts this, just ask around (Deut. 4:32).⁵

Deuteronomy 26:16-19

This passage occurs at the end of the great section in Deuteronomy which has spelled out both the general and the particular precepts of the *torah*/covenant. Although the Hebrew grammar does raise some questions, what does seem clear is that there is here an exchange of oaths between YHWH and his people. YHWH will be Israel's God, and Israel in turn will walk in his ways and observe his laws.

The covenant is ratified, appropriately, through mutual declarations. Then follows the enumerations of blessings and cursings in Deuteronomy 27-28.

We have noted that Deuteronomy 4 made some comparisons between Israel and other nations in terms of Israel's God, Israel's experience, and "this torah" Israel has received. In considering the covenantal contours of Israel's praise this passage (Deut. 26:16-19) elaborates something else which will be uniquely Israel's, if she walks in the way of his decrees and laws. Deuteronomy 26:18 says that Israel is YHWH's "treasured possession" (*segullah*; cf. Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; Mal. 3:17). This points out the great value which YHWH places on his people. They are a precious jewel which is reserved for royalty.

Deuteronomy 26:19 extends the description of how YHWH will favor Israel. The Hebrew text reads as follows: *uletitteka 'elyon 'al kol-haggoyim 'asher 'asah lithillah uleshem uletip'aret. . . .* Some of this phraseology is picked up and put to use by the prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah, both active around the time of Josiah's reform and after (Jer. 13:11; 33:9; Zeph. 3:19-20; cf. Isa. 62:3,7,9). The context "seems to indicate that praise, fame and honour will be conferred on Israel through the action of Yahweh."⁶

This passage should be seen in the light of Deuteronomy 4:6. Israel has received righteous statutes and ordinances in the covenant. Keeping them will impress the nations, and the nations will praise Israel. But Israel must live faithfully and sincerely with(in) this *torah*. Craigie says, "Israel, remaining faithful to the covenant God, would be renowned among the other nations, not because of inherent merit, but because the covenant community would reflect the glory of the covenant God in its national life."⁷ The point is that through the covenantal bond Israel herself will become renowned, even praised, but she has YHWH to thank (i.e. praise or bless) for such international adulation.

Deuteronomy 32

This chapter records the covenant witness song which Moses taught Israel to sing as a perpetual reminder of the covenant which YHWH has made within sinful Israel. Many commentators have noted the *rib*-pattern (pronounced "reeve," meaning "lawsuit") within the song.⁸ Thompson, however, observes that words of hope are added to the secular *rib*-pattern so that Israel may remind herself that "this torah" from YHWH is a covenant of grace.⁹ Indeed the song begins with a doxological note (Deut. 32:3-4), which extols YHWH's name, greatness, justice, and faithfulness.

Israel must remind herself in this song of witness that YHWH is great and good, and he is worthy to be praised. He is truly Israel's praise and God (cf. Deut. 10:21). Just as "this torah" must be read before all Israel every seven years (Deut. 31:10-13), so this song of covenant witness will put praise into Israel's mouth and give reasons for heartfelt praise. In a *rib*-like song in Deuteronomy 32 there is praise within the covenant framework. History gives the ground for existence, but it is a grand history. To recite it is to cause praise. A unique God has done unique things. *This* and only this makes Israel unique. In YHWH's covenant is then the source for doxology and praise.¹⁰

In Deuteronomy 32:43, the witness-song's last verse, there is some textual question. Does it read, "Rejoice, O nations, with his people [*im 'ammo*]?" Can it be read, "Praise His people, O you nations"? The textual question will not be addressed here, but both translations do resonate with other biblical revelation. The Psalms call the nations to join in Israel's praise of YHWH (e.g., Ps. 117). Israel's deliverance has been great, has led to outbursts of joyful worship, and the nations are addressed with a call to join such worship.¹¹

If the second translation is followed (as in the RSV), it follows that when YHWH sets Israel on high and when Israel returns to faithfulness, then God's people can be the object of praise and admiration from the nations again. The last words of the witness-song recall YHWH's work for his people in removing Israel's enemies and her sin.

Deuteronomy 33:26-29

The blessing on the tribes recorded in this chapter begins with a description of YHWH's military-like advance from Sinai as the king of these tribes. After the blessings are pronounced, there comes a passage extolling two incomparable entities: YHWH and Israel, with the emphasis on YHWH. He is the incomparable God of Jeshurun (*'eyn ka'el yesurun*).¹² This God rides the clouds to bring *heil* (redemption) to his people in his land (Deut. 33:26-28). This puts Israel in an incomparable position before the nations. Being blessed and secure in her land, Israel will overpower the (gods of the) other nations (Deut. 33:28-29).¹³

Thus we see that through the covenant with its history of divine faithfulness and its righteous statutes and ordinances Israel is a unique nation since her nearby God is unique, her wonderous experiences are unique, and her torah (i.e., covenant) is unique. Israel has become an outpost of God's kingdom on earth. There can arise within Deuteronomy itself ascriptions of praise to God. Even the statements of incomparability anticipate the response which is expressed in worship and praise. In the covenant Israel worships in a unique way.

The Torah and the Psalms

A theological connection between the covenant and the literature of the Psalms can now be made. We have already mentioned that much liturgical literature from non-Israelite sources exists. We will not enter into a discussion on whether Israel borrowed and adopted from other nations, and if so, to what extent.

But the question of Psalm sources, interesting in itself, often ends with itself. Often such discussions fail to recognize adequately the fact that in the Exodus-redemption and the subsequent covenant-making at Horeb, all of which is rooted in the covenant with Abraham and ultimately in God's electing choice, Israel's life and worship are fundamentally unique, and the canon reflects this uniqueness. Weiser admits that it is "not the borrowed forms which are

the primary and determining factor of the Old Testament psalms, but the contents, rooted as they are in genuinely Israelite tradition, though foreign forms were also used as their vehicles.”¹⁴

When the Psalter is viewed as a whole, its name *tehillim* suggests what it is about: praise. Within the Psalter collection there are hymns, songs of thanks, communal/individual laments, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, torah psalms, etc. But they correctly are named *tehillim*, “praises.” Canonically the covenantal relationship undergirds them, and the covenant is “the Psalms’ sphere of existence.”¹⁵

Each of the five Psalter books ends with doxology, and the entire collection is concluded with a number of “Hallelujah” psalms. Even the lament form (which is not rare in the Psalms) fits the overall context of covenantal undergirding in that the lament addresses the God who is near, though he may be momentarily silent and thus seem far away. When he responds to the distressed speaker, it is because he is faithful to his promises in the covenant to hear and answer whenever Israel calls upon him (cf. Deut. 4:7). Hence the lament can end in doxology and praise (e.g., Psalm 22).

In the Psalter one detects that the canonical shape of the Psalter, which has spoken and continues to speak to the covenant community of faith, shows an overall movement towards praise as the last word. Psalms of praise are characteristically, though not exclusively, within the second half of the Psalter. One is always “moving toward praise. . . . Praise and thanks are in a sense the *final* word, the direction one is headed in the relationship with God.”¹⁶

What is striking is how the Psalter begins. If it ends in praise, it is begun by blessing that person who ponders and practices *torah*. Psalm 1 introduces the whole Psalter by directing one’s attention to two ways of life.¹⁷ The life under *torah* is held up as happy because YHWH watches one whose way follows *torah*. Psalm 1 does not appear to point to a legal code exclusively, but to all which “this torah” (Deut. 1:5) of Moses includes: its history, exhortations, ordinances, and sanctions.

All the elements that comprise the covenant find their way into the various Psalms. Obviously, YHWH is praised and lauded for who he is and for what he had done (e.g., Psalms 8, 81, etc.). The covenantal history, including the murmurings and rebellions, is remembered in the context of praise (e.g., Ps. 105-106, 135-136, etc.). The deuteronomic injunction to instruct the children is recalled in Psalm 78. The righteous statutes and ordinances are praised in Psalm 119 (cf. Ps. 19, etc.). Even Israel "pats itself on the back" when it recalls that no other nation has received "this torah" except Israel (Ps. 147:19-20; N.B. the final "praise the LORD!"). In the Psalms the elements of the covenant are adumbrated within the framework of worship and doxological response. At the same time, praise and joy are expressed within the contours of God's covenant.

The most exuberant, extensive, and expansive indicators of who and what God is and is about are found and elaborated in the hymns and songs of thanksgiving which the people of Israel and individuals in that community uttered again and again in the course of Israel's history. There the sovereignty of God is given language and structure. There the power and majesty of the Lord are uncovered and made visible. In the hymns of Israel the most elemental structure of Old Testament faith is set forth.¹⁸

The picture which emerges shows clearly that the biblical Psalms grew organically out of the rich covenantal relationship expressed in Deuteronomy. Furthermore, the canonical relationship between Deuteronomy and the Psalter is not arbitrary or artificial at all. The two books speak today to the believing community and reinforce the message of each book. One may begin with the *torah* (cf. Ps. 1) and end with praise (cf. Ps. 150). At the same time biblical worship maintains that rich relationship of covenantal life and communion with YHWH.¹⁹

Childs is correct when he states the following:

It is highly significant that the psalmist understands Israel's prayer [i.e., the Psalms together, MVH] as a

response to God's prior speaking. Israel's prayers are not simply spontaneous musings or uncontrolled aspirations, but rather an answer to God's word which continues to address Israel in his Torah.²⁰

Thus, if our considerations be correct, then the biblical life in covenant and biblical praise are unique, and they are part of the same redemptive-historical fabric. The covenant, initiated unilaterally by a just and merciful YHWH, is maintained in a community which, having come to know YHWH and "this torah" (Deut. 1:5) he gave, responds with *faith* and *obedience*, but also *praise*.

NOTES

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to enter into the discussion regarding exact differences between the "hymn" and the "song of thanksgiving" (Gunkel) or "descriptive" and "declarative praise" (Westermann). Cf. C. Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, trans. by Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) 15-35.
2. J. Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 83.
3. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 214.
4. P.C. Craigie says, "The covenant would establish a relationship with the Lord which would distinguish Israel from her neighbors" (*The Book of Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 131). Cf. J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974): "Moses made two deductions: first, the fact that God had given his law to Israel pointed to an intimacy of relationship between him and Israel that existed in no other religion; secondly, the law of Yahweh, which surpassed all other laws in righteousness, should be the pride of Israel (cf. Pss. 119; 147:19; etc.)" 103.

5. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 142-44; Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy*, 90-91; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 108.
6. A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 339.
7. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 325.
8. E.g., Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 381; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 296.
9. Thompson (*Deuteronomy*, 297) notes the following non-*rib* elements: an assurance of deliverance (32:26-38); YHWH's own word promising deliverance (32:39-42); and a call for Israel to worship God (32:43).
10. Cf. Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy*, 282.
11. Ridderbos says, "The nations are exhorted to rejoice with Israel over the impending deliverance. . . . This appeal to the nations is in the first instance a rhetorical device to express the greatness of Israel's salvation (*heil*). But in the light of the revelation as a whole, statements such as this acquire a deeper meaning and significance, namely, that in the *heil* that befalls Israel the entire world is involved" (*Deuteronomy*, 296).
12. Cf. Exodus 15:11.
13. In conquest and through "this torah" YHWH is exalted over Israel who submits. In giving the law at Horeb YHWH has made himself King (33:4-5). Through torah (i.e., covenant) he rules. This suggests a remarkable connection to the dominion mandate (the so-called "great commission") given by Jesus Christ to his church as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. Christ possesses all authority everywhere. Therefore, the church must disciple all around her ("all nations") through baptism into the name of the Triune God and through teaching them *to obey* all that he commanded. The kingdom is made manifest among those peoples who submit to the sacrament and who obey the Christian torah (understood in its broad sense of gospel believed and worked out in love). Via "this torah" the blessing promised through

Abraham is mediated to the whole world.

14. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 54.
15. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 62. Cf. Childs, *Introduction*, 514.
16. Patrick Miller, "'Enthroned on the Praises of Israel': The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology," *Interpretation* 39/1 (Jan., 1985) 7.
17. Childs, *Introduction*, 512.
18. Miller, "Praise of God," 5. Cf. Basil De Pinto's comment, "It is fruitless to speak of the Torah purely as law; the legal aspect is strictly connected with the historical traditions without which it would have no living roots, and the history of the chosen people always gives way to a manner of living expressed in the concrete forms that constitute the legal codes" ("The Torah and the Psalms," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 [1967] 155).
19. Cf. Kline, *Structure*, 63.
20. Childs, *Introduction*, 513.