

**Modern Difficulties with Yahweh's Violence
Against Disloyal Israel in
Deuteronomy 4 and 32**

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INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that the Old Testament is a book filled with violence. That Yahweh himself acts with violence should be likewise undisputed. Schwager claims to have counted 1,000 occurrences of divine violence in the Old Testament.¹ Though not the wicked violence represented by the Hebrew **זמא**, Yahweh many times wields force that would be called “violence” within a contemporary context. This violence has created a barrier for sympathetic readings of the text by modern people, both at the popular and scholarly levels.

Goal

In this paper I examine one particular kind of divine violence: the threats that Yahweh makes against Israel if she is disloyal to him. I am not unconcerned with violence done in the name of Yahweh, such as the practice of **מא** against the Canaanites. However, the Old Testament’s focus on Yahweh’s relationship with Israel makes study of violence within *this* relationship more fruitful. I concentrate on the book of Deuteronomy because it is the theological center for Israel’s relationship with her God. My goal is to find a model for contemporary thought about Yahweh’s violence against Israel. This morning I will consider two important passages on the theme: the sermon of Deuteronomy 4 and the song of Deuteronomy 32.

Background and Method

I should state at the outset that this paper represents part of a larger project that explores the dynamics of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh in the Old Testament. In studying this relationship, I have found that the process of offending Yahweh and being reconciled to him again often involves a violent act or some sort of suffering as the turning point from offense to reconciliation. Since violence within a loving relationship, even one that has gone wrong, is repugnant to modern values, my current focus is on the way violence functions in Yahweh’s relationship with Israel. I mention the larger project because I am sure it biases my study and blinds me to other aspects of the topic that should be given more attention.

My method is to read the final form of the text as part of a canonical whole. I do not attempt to maintain an objective distance while reading the canonical text. Nor do I read the text as a resident of its ancient culture. Rather, I seek to hold on to my (post)modern worldview as I read. I try to be historically sensitive, but without losing hold of my own ideology and values. Such a reading strategy seems appropriate to theological study because the God of the ancient world is in substantial continuity with the God worshipped by modern communities of faith.

¹ R. Schwager, *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock?* (Munich: Kösel, 1978), 58-74, cited in Robert North, “Violence and the Bible: The Girard Connection,” *CBQ* 47:1 (1985): 14-15.

Guy Harrison, an outspoken atheist, in an article entitled “Where are the Moral Believers?” asks believers to consider their own sacred documents and have the courage to declare, “Based on the actions of this god, ... I cannot follow or worship him because I am a decent human being.”² Although not everyone may come to that conclusion, it seems that honest ideological engagement with the God presented in the text is a worthwhile, even necessary, exercise.

Deuteronomy as Nation-State Document

Before I turn to these two texts, I should mention that I read the book of Deuteronomy as a fundamentally political document. This is no new idea; it has been well presented by Dean McBride³ and Patrick Miller,⁴ among others. But it is important for my interpretation that Deuteronomy be understood as a book that constitutes a political state of Israel under Yahweh’s governance. And beyond this, the book also shapes the people who make up the citizenry of that state. The book forms a nation: a unified people with a common history and a common land, a people bound together by their common worship of Yahweh.

THE TEXTS

Having done with these preliminaries, I now turn to the texts of Deuteronomy 4 and 32.

Deuteronomy 4

Deuteronomy 4 is a sermon by Moses that exhorts Israel to obey Yahweh’s commands. It concludes his introduction to the law. The decalogue follows in the next chapter. Although the sermon is framed by the exhortation to obey the entire law, idolatry is its principle concern. More specifically, Moses focuses on Yahweh’s demand that Israel hold fast to him alone.

Moses warns that following after other gods or imaging Yahweh with idols will lead to terrible consequences. He opens by recalling the incident at Peor where some of Israel turned to worship Baal.⁵ Moses warns, “You have seen for yourselves what the LORD did with regard to the Baal of Peor – how the LORD your God destroyed (שָׁמַד) from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, while those of you who held fast (דָּבַקְתֶּם) to the LORD your God are all alive today” (4:3). Moses warns that turning away from Yahweh and turning to another god means violent destruction.

Moses also reminds Israel that he himself is being blocked by Yahweh from entering the promised land. Though Moses never committed idolatry, his point is that “the LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (4:24) and he will punish harshly any faithlessness, of which idolatry is

² Guy P. Harrison, “Where Are the Moral Believers?” *Free Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (Dec. 2005). n.p. Cited 2 May 2006. Online: http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=harrison_25_1.

³ Dean McBride, “Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy,” *Int* 41 (1987).

⁴ Patrick D. Miller, “Constitution or Instruction? The Purpose of Deuteronomy,” in *Way of the Lord: Essays In Old Testament Theology* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Tübingen: Paul Mohr, 2004).

⁵ Num 25.

the worst form. Moses gravely warns them to learn from his own example: “So be careful not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you” (4:23).

These history lessons provide backing for Moses’ main point: to warn Israel about her future in the land. He proclaims, “When you have had children and children’s children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed” (4:25-26).

The demand here is single-minded devotion to Yahweh. Moses foreshadows the shema as he draws his conclusion: “So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (4:39). His point here is not primarily the ontological uniqueness of Yahweh,⁶ but rather that the imageless Yahweh is to be the unique object of Israel’s devotion.⁷

Fortunately, the sermon does not point to utter annihilation if Israel is unfaithful. Rather, her destruction takes the form of being scattered among the nations and being reduced to an insignificant remnant of her former glory (v.27). And it is in her suffering that things will turn around for Israel. “In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him” (v.30). And when Israel turns back to Yahweh, he will honor his promise to the patriarchs: “Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy (שחית) you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (v.31).

It would be wrong for me to imply that Yahweh is portrayed as only commanding and threatening Israel. Moses takes pains to emphasize his kindness to her. One need only look at the exodus and the coming conquest of Canaan. Moses proclaims, “Because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today” (4:37-38). Moses asks, “What other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD your God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” (4:7-8). Yahweh is taking impoverished and enslaved Israel and giving her justice, security, and prosperity. But these gifts depend upon Israel’s utter devotion to him.

⁶ Cf. allocation of other objects of worship for other nations in v.19

⁷ Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Paul Mohr, 2003).

In fact, the language goes beyond Israel simply agreeing to be Yahweh's people. When he took Israel from Egypt, they became "a people of his very own possession (לְהַיְיֹת לּוֹ לְעַם נַחֲלָה)" (v.20).⁸ Israel *belongs* to Yahweh. The corollary is that Israel is not self-determining. Foreshadowing my later discussion, I just note that the idea of people not being self-determining is deeply troubling to contemporary values.

Deuteronomy 32

I now turn to the second passage under consideration, the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. This song in some ways mirrors the sermon of chapter 4. The sermon looks to the future and warns Israel not to turn away from Yahweh. The song, on the other hand, confronts Israel *after* she turns away from Yahweh and suffers under his jealous hand. Yahweh predicts to Moses what is going to happen in the future: "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. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness" (31:19-21). The song is presented as the interpretational key Israel will need in her misery.

The song reads as a poetic narrative. It begins the story with Yahweh having Israel as his allotted inheritance (תְּהַבֵּל נַחֲלָתוֹ; 32:9). He then proceeds to take wonderful care of her, with rich poetic expression, sustaining her in the howling wilderness waste (32:10). He set Israel on the heights of the land, nursing her with honey, oil, curds, milk, and fat (32:13-14). The song carefully notes that "the LORD alone guided [her]; no foreign god was with him" (32:12).

So how does Israel respond to all of this kindness? The song testifies, "Jacob ate his fill; / Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. / You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! / He abandoned God who made him, / and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. / They made him jealous with strange gods, / with abhorrent things they provoked him. . . . You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; / you forgot the God who gave you birth" (32:15-16, 18). As in the sermon, Yahweh wants Israel to respond to him with the unique devotion that he gives her. But she does not. She is ungrateful and unfaithful.

Yahweh responds with jealousy (vv.19, 21) and anger (v.22). He begins heaping disasters upon Israel: hunger, disease, wild beasts, and the sword of other nations (vv.23-25). He brings Israel to the point of utter annihilation but then pauses. He reflects, "I thought to scatter them / and blot out the memory of them from humankind; / but I feared provocation by the enemy, / for their adversaries might misunderstand / and say, 'Our hand is triumphant; / it was not the LORD who did all this'" (32:26-27). So he then turns to vindicate his people against their enemies, but not before exulting over

⁸ Cf. also that Yahweh took "a nation for himself (לְקַחֵת לּוֹ גּוֹי) from the midst of another nation" (v.34).

Israel in her beaten-down state. When her power is gone, the LORD will say, “Where are their gods, / the rock in which they took refuge, / who ate the fat of their sacrifices, / and drank the wine of their libations? / Let them rise up and help you, / let them be your protection! / 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” (32:37-39).

Again, as in the sermon, Yahweh demands that he be Israel’s one and only god. He alone provided for Israel in the wilderness. But Israel went after strange gods, turning away from him. This unfaithfulness provokes him and he unleashes his destructive, consuming anger against her. As Israel lies on the ground, bloody and beaten, Yahweh addresses her and demands that she recognize him as the one god, who kills and makes alive. His dominating role in Israel’s life simply cannot be questioned: “No one can deliver from my hand” (32:39).

But again, it is important not to be one-sided. Yahweh does not only demand and destroy, but gives and loves. It is Israel’s unwarranted ingratitude that inflames his consuming anger. He has been devoted to her, “as an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions” (32:11). But she has forgotten “the God who gave you birth” (32:18). Yahweh demands to be recognized and responded to, to set the rules, to have everything else in relation to him who is at the center of Israel’s life.

The song does not portray Yahweh as a tyrant, but in glowing terms: “The Rock, his work is perfect, / and all his ways are just. / A faithful God, without deceit, / just and upright is he” (32:4).

As in the sermon, Yahweh is the provider of Israel’s justice, security, and prosperity. But if she spurns him and turns to other gods, his destructive response is sure.

THE ISSUES

How can modern western readers begin to understand this strange justice of Yahweh that can violently coerce Israel’s loyalty? Its foreignness to contemporary thinking is rather well-known and hardly deserves comment. It goes without saying that contemporary marriage is no model for understanding coerced loyalty. But what about the modern state-citizen relationship? At first it seems unlikely: Yahweh demands Israel worship him alone. In the modern world, freedom of religion is a central value. Yahweh determines the shape of Israel’s law and government. In the modern world, nations are self-determining. Yahweh acts with supreme power and will. Modern governments are limited through guarantees of human rights and systems of checks-and-balances. Yahweh acts personally and passionately. Modern societies are conducted according to the impersonal and dispassionate rule of law. At first glance, the structure of Yahweh’s position as head of Israel seems so unlike any modern state system that comparison is impossible, and understanding the Yahweh of Deuteronomy appears hopeless.

However, it is possible to find considerable similarity between the ways of Yahweh and the ways of the modern world. If you will offer me a few more minutes of attention, I will outline my case.

Yahweh promises to bring justice, security, and prosperity to Israel. But the cost of these gifts is her undiluted loyalty to him. If she is disloyal and threatens to upset his primacy, he will exercise his coercive power to replace blessed life in the land with suffering, death, and dispersion until she returns to him as his loyal people.

I suggest that in the modern west, we largely accept a similar structure. Modern liberal democratic capitalism promises justice, security, and prosperity. Although it seems that our liberal system is open to criticism and even disloyalty, I argue that any disloyalty that actually threatens the modern system is met with considerable violence. I do not have time to go into sufficient detail to prove the point, but it does not take much historical reflection to realize that during the 1950s it was very dangerous to advocate a competitive system, such as communism. In 1953, when Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets, the judge held them responsible for the Korean war and more than 50,000 deaths. He asserted that the west was in “a life and death struggle with a completely different system” and that the Rosenbergs must die in order to preserve western society.⁹ Disloyalty to one’s society leads to the ultimate punishment. Of course, it is worth noting that the communists thought that their way led to justice, security, and prosperity. Every empire thinks this way.

For more recent examples, one needs only read the newspaper. Or even better, review President Bush’s speech on 20 Sept 2001 launching the war on terror.¹⁰ You will be reminded that supporting the overthrow of the western world order to establish certain forms of Islamic government is a dangerous activity.

I could multiply examples. But my point is that governments and empires throughout the ages, up to and including today, demand loyalty to their governments, beliefs, institutions, and way of life. It seems to me that the overall structure of Yahweh’s threats against Israel if she should choose to worship other gods is quite similar to modern threats against traitors.

The modern western world does guarantee freedom of religion. But in this context, “religion” means privatized religion that is subordinate to the state. Rousseau put it quite clearly: freedom of religion goes only so far as one’s religion does not take away from one’s loyalty to the state. He wrote, “Tolerance should be given to all religions that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of citizenship.”¹¹ In other words, it is fine to be devoted to fundamentalist Islam,

⁹ Walter Schneir and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (London: W.H. Allen, 1966), 169-71.

¹⁰ George W. Bush, “Freedom at War with Fear,” n.p. cited 5 May 2006. Online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (trans. G.D.H. Cole; London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1961), 115.

but if you travel from your home in California to Afghanistan to join the Taliban's army, and if you find yourself opposing your own United States Army, you will be charged with a capital crime, as John Walker Lindh, the so-called "American Taliban," found out. In the modern world, your fundamental loyalty is to your state. In the kingdom of Yahweh, your fundamental loyalty is to him. Yahweh has no tolerance for his people choosing another religion. Yahweh threatens violence against those who choose another object of worship. Within the liberal democratic state and the economic system of capitalism, it is exactly these structures that are the objects of worship and coerced loyalty in the modern system. It is just that non-religious language is generally used to depict devotion to these systems.

Next, consider the question of self-determination. In the modern world, only self-determined governments are permitted. But these self-determined governments must have a certain shape to them. They must be democracies. They must be capitalistic. They must respect modern ideas of human rights. Recall that even the new self-determined and democratic government of Afghanistan came under tremendous pressure recently when a convert from Islam to Christianity was threatened with capital punishment. Western governments asserted that their soldiers did not die to form a government that does not guarantee freedom of worship.¹² It is true that Yahweh demands that Israel worship him alone, with the law, priesthood, and king of his choosing. It is also true that he is willing to use coercive and violent force to maintain Israel's worship of him. But the quasi-religious constructs of modern life similarly demand loyalty: states are self-determining only as long as they determine that they should be liberal democracies.¹³

What about limited government? In the modern world, definitions of human rights and systems of checks and balances limit the power of governing authorities. For example, in America due process and the cooperation of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government are required before one can be deprived of life or liberty. These limitations are true under normal circumstances—as long as the political, social, and economic structures of society are unthreatened. However, these guarantees are considerably weakened in times of war. The so-called "war on drugs" permits the killing of suspected traffickers without trial and the so-called "war on terror" allows indefinite imprisonment without trial. Modern government's self-imposed limitations are waived when a substantial threat appears. What about Yahweh? His totalizing power inspires fear in those who prefer their governments to be tightly controlled with limited power. He is untamable and assertive, doing what he pleases according to his own sense of justice. If Israel is disloyal to him, he can choose to bring in a foreign army to defeat and deport her. The modern world sees such power in the hands of

¹² CNN, "Top Muslim Clerics: Convert Must Die," n.p. cited 24 Mar 2006. Online: <http://us.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/03/23/afghan.christian.ap/index.html>.

¹³ While Saudi Arabia and other nations may have non-conforming structures, this is true only as long as they do not threaten the overall modern western system.

a single personality as unreasonably dangerous, but somehow sits comfortably with the effectively unlimited power of the modern structures of state and economy. One could argue that modern states rule by written law and not through a passionate deity. Yet, Yahweh documents his requirements and makes unquestionably clear to Israel what will provoke his wrath. He is neither arbitrary nor capricious. After all, Deuteronomy in its canonical setting is all about warning Israel *away from* disloyalty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have outlined the way Deuteronomy 4 and 32 display Yahweh threatening Israel if she is disloyal to him. I have compared his threats to the way modern governments demand the loyalty of their people. I do not wish to gloss over the considerable violence Yahweh is willing to wield against Israel, for at least at first glance it can be seen as cruel or even sadistic. However, it seems to me that if one is honest about the terrible violence the modern world finds acceptable, it becomes clear that Yahweh's violence (at least in these cases) is not of a wholly different character. I suggest that the consideration of Yahweh's use of violence against disloyal Israel might well begin with a structural comparison with the demythologized modern state system. Though Yahweh and the liberal democratic state system obviously clash as totalizing ideological forces, realizing their similarities might be a helpful starting point. Clarifying their structural similarity might well make the Old Testament more understandable to modern readers. It may even make the modern world itself more understandable.