

# Moses' praise and blame – Israel's honour and shame: Rhetorical devices in the ethical foundations of Deuteronomy

**Author:**Dominik Markl<sup>1,2</sup>**Affiliations:**<sup>1</sup>Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University, California<sup>2</sup>Department of Old Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Correspondence to:**

Dominik Markl

**Email:**

dmarkl@jstb.edu

**Postal address:**

Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University, 1756 Leroy Avenue, Berkeley 94709, California

**Dates:**

Received: 22 Apr. 2013

Accepted: 21 May 2013

Published: 05 Sept. 2013

**How to cite this article:**

Markl, D., 2013, 'Moses' praise and blame – Israel's honour and shame: Rhetorical devices in the ethical foundations of Deuteronomy', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34(2), Art. #861, 4 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v34i2.861>

**Note:**

Dr D. Markl SJ is a research associate of the Department of Old Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

**Copyright:**

© 2013. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article analyses the rhetorical devices of praise and blame employed in Moses' speeches in the book of Deuteronomy. Praise and blame are mainly used in the framework of the central Law Code, Deuteronomy 1–11, 26–34. Some of the most prominent occurrences of Moses' rhetoric of praise and blame form literary inclusions, in parallel (Dt 4:7; 33; 29) and contrasting (Dt 4:6; 29:24; 32:6) ways. Both praise and blame are used to inspire faithfulness to God and obedience to the Torah. In this way, Moses forms Israel's ethical values as the foundation of the people's legal order.

## Introduction

Moses' discourses in the book of Deuteronomy are essentially both theological and political insofar as it is his utmost concern to re-constitute Israel as the people of God for their life in the Promised Land (cf. McBride 1993). It is within this political-theological mentality that Moses summarises and explains the Torah from Sinai and within which the legal core of Deuteronomy 12–25 is embedded.

This article analyses one specific aspect of Moses' political-theological discourse, the rhetoric of praise and blame (on the broader context, see Markl 2012:18–87). It is a classical assumption of rhetorical theory, developed by Aristotle in the ninth chapter of the first book of his *Rhetoric*, that praise and blame are specific devices to be used by a rhetorician, especially at festive occasions. Moses praises and blames his audience Israel several times within Deuteronomy. He does this at a special festive occasion – on the last day of his life, when the Moab covenant is established (Dt 29–30).

Praise and blame evoke honour and shame, pride and humility. These attitudes and emotions were analysed by David Hume (see the first part of book II on 'pride and humility' in Hume 1740) and Adam Smith (chapter 1–2 of part II in Smith 1759) regarding their moral implications. The crucial role of honour for morality was most recently investigated by Kwame Anthony Appiah (Appiah 2010).

Within the narrated world of Deuteronomy, Moses aims at forming Israel's moral sentiments of pride and humility and therefore lays the psychological foundations of the people's ethical values. In its final form, however, the book of Deuteronomy addresses Judeans of the Persian time aiming at re-establishing their identity as 'Israel', the people of God (Markl 2012:291–295).

The outline of this article will follow three steps. In the first two steps, honour and shame will be discussed in their relationship with the people's covenant with God and obedience to the Torah. In the third step, I show how the structural occurrences of Moses' rhetoric of honour and shame in the framework of Deuteronomy provide the ethical foundations for Israel. This analysis of Moses' praise and blame will concentrate on explicit qualifications of Israel by adjectives or nouns.

## Israel's honour: The relationship with God and the wisdom of the Torah

Moses praises Israel for the first time at the beginning of his parenetical discourses in Deuteronomy 4. In his second call to obedience in verses 5–8, Moses inspires Israel by referring to their future honour. The introduction in verse 5 presents a condensation of the narrative plot of Deuteronomy (Sonnet 2011:38–41): 'See, I teach you statutes and ordinances as Yhwh my God has charged me, to act on in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.' The command in verse 6, 'and you shall keep them and you shall do them', is followed by an elaborate sequence of clauses,

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

giving reasons for keeping the commandments, which are all rooted in Israel's honour (cf. Braulik 1988). The reasons in verses 6–8 are structured by three introductions, which are linked to each other by their introductions (כִּי [for], כִּי מִי [for whom] and מִי [who]). In the first causal clause, Moses claims that the statutes and ordinances will be 'your wisdom and discernment' in the sight of the nations, underlining this by a presumed exclamation of these nations, who will acknowledge: 'Just a wise and discerning people is this great nation!' Both the following rhetorical questions in verses 7–8, however, go beyond even this first claim, implying the uniqueness of Israel regarding God's closeness 'in all our calling to him' (v. 7) and regarding the justice of the statutes and ordinances (v. 8).

Three details of this rhetorically refined passage pertaining to Israel's praise should be pointed out. Firstly, the term גֹּי גָדוֹל [great nation] is used three times in verses 6–8. The first occurrence is the final peak of the quotation of the nations whilst the second and the third pick up this keyword as the introduction to the rhetorical questions. Nowhere else in the Bible is this expression used with comparable density. The expression occurs with reference to Israel only in Genesis and Deuteronomy – in God's promises to Abraham and Jacob (Gn 12:2; 17:20; 18:18; 46:3) and in Deuteronomy in addition to our passage only in the creed in Deuteronomy 26:5. The only two remaining usages of the expression, which are found in Jeremiah 6:22 and 50:41, are referring to a great nation from the north on both occasions. This use shows just how prominent and decisive this passage is in the introductory discourses of Deuteronomy regarding Israel's self-esteem as a 'great nation'. Israel is great only and insofar as they live in close relationship with God and insofar as they have a just and wise Torah.

Secondly, we observe the change from the address in the second person in verse 6 to the use of the first person plural in verse 7: 'Who is a great nation, to whom there is a god so near as Yhwh *our* God in all *our* calling to him?' In this context, it is not by chance that Moses includes himself into Israel's we-group. For, as Moses pointed out in his account of Israel's failed conquest in Qadesh, God shows himself far from Israel when they are opposed to Moses (Dt 1:45): 'When you returned and wept before Yhwh, Yhwh would neither heed your voice nor pay you attention.' God is close to Israel in a unique way as long as the Israelites pray together with Moses in one mind.

Thirdly, Moses introduces the term 'Torah' to his audience in this decisive context. Moses uses the term 'Torah', which summarises his teaching in Deuteronomy, for the first time in Deuteronomy 4:8. This central term is also used in the introductions in Deuteronomy 1:5 and 4:44 by the narrator. 'All this Torah' consists essentially of just statutes and ordinances, which make Israel a great and unique nation amongst all other nations.

Deuteronomy 4:6–8 as a whole shows in a condensed and programmatic way that the gift of the Torah and the unique relationship with God meant honour for Israel.

If we read further, we see that the main body of Moses' speech in Deuteronomy 4:1–40 revolves around the Horeb theophany as the moment when Moses received his commission to teach God's Torah. This is the decisive experience of Yhwh as a figureless God, stressing the prohibition of images. The speech climaxes in Moses' prophetic vision of the future in verses 25–31 (cf. Otto 2011). The last passage of the speech in 4:32–40 aims at Israel's knowledge of God's uniqueness (on the literary form, see Braulik 2006). It starts by summarising Israel's unique experience:

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as Yhwh your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deuteronomy 4:32–34)

Here again, Moses refers to unique experiences of Israel by employing rhetorical questions – the experience of the Horeb theophany and the rescue from Egypt in inverted sequence.

Both passages, Deuteronomy 4:6–8 and 4:32–34, employ a very specific rhetorical scheme: an introductory causal clause with כִּי [for], which is followed by a sequence of rhetorical questions. This device forms an inner inclusion in this speech. Both passages taken together point out that the gift of the Torah of Deuteronomy plus the experiences of the theophany at Horeb and being rescued by God from Egypt were the three decisive experiences which are to form Israel's honour.

Another passage closely related to Deuteronomy 4:33 can be found in Deuteronomy 5. Moses formulates the answer of the elders after his quotation of the Decalogue:

Look, Yhwh our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live... For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? (Deuteronomy 5:24, 26)

This is by no means what the account in Exodus 20:19 says about the people's reaction, but it is how Moses wishes Israel to remember their Horeb experience, precisely according to his long sermon in Deuteronomy 4 (cf. Markl 2007:226–235). Israel's unique relationship with God is grounded in their experience of his theophany at Horeb. It is Israel's honour to have survived the perception of God's glory.

Moses further praises Israel for their covenant relationship in the expressions עַם קְדוֹשׁ [holy people] and עַם סֵּלֶקֶה [treasured people] in Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:18f. and 28:9. These expressions are most fully elaborated in 26:18f., at the end of Moses' longest discourse Deuteronomy 5–26:

Today Yhwh has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise

and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to Yhwh your God, as he promised. (Deuteronomy 26:18f.)

This is the most explicit reference to Israel's honour in Deuteronomy, and the context shows clearly that this honour is directly related to their covenant relationship with God (Lohfink 1990; Markl 2012:109–111).

There is a last emphatic praise of Israel, which at the same time is the very last words that Moses speaks to Israel in Deuteronomy. It is the final verse of his blessing:

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by Yhwh, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies will come fawning to you, and you will tread on their backs. (Deuteronomy 33:29)

Again, just as in Deuteronomy 4:5, Israel's uniqueness is emphasised by a rhetorical question containing 'who'. Here it is Israel's future experience of God's rescue which deserves praise.

In the light of this survey, it can be concluded that all the reasons which Moses gives to Israel to feel honour and pride are grounded in their relationship with God, which is founded on their experience of the Exodus and the theophany at Horeb. It is deepened in the covenant relationship through which they receive the Torah as God's most precious gift.

## Israel's shame: Unfaithfulness and disobedience

Moses by no means only praises Israel in Deuteronomy. On the contrary, he unfolds the paradigm of Israel's shameful sin, most elaborately in Deuteronomy 9f., the sin with the Golden Calf. Because of this event Moses calls Israel 'stiffnecked people' twice (Dt 9:6, 13). This judgement is transformed in Deuteronomy 31 into a statement about Israel's future sin. In the theophany of Deuteronomy 31:15–22, God announces Israel's breaking of the covenant in the future. In 31:27, Moses communicates to the Levites God's knowledge of Israel's future sin by referring to his own experience, saying:

For I know well how rebellious and *stiffnecked* you are. If you already have been so rebellious toward Yhwh while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death! (Deuteronomy 31:27)

This motif, which was introduced in Deuteronomy 9, is deliberately re-used and transformed in Deuteronomy 31 (see in detail Braulik 2008; Zipor 1996).

Yet, Israel has to hear the most serious accusations in the song which Moses conveys to them (Dt 32:1–43; for the history of research on the song, see Otto 2009; Sanders 1996). For the greatest part, the poem describes Israel's faithlessness which is about to be made manifest in their impending future. Introducing this theme in verse 5, Israel is characterised as 'children unworthy of' God and as a 'crooked, perverse generation'. In verse 6, they are called a 'foolish and senseless people'. The second adjective here is חָכָם [wise] negated by אֵלֵּי [not], the opposite of the wisdom which the Torah grants Israel according to Deuteronomy 4:6 (חָכָם וְיִרְאָה). Deuteronomy

32:7–25 describes in powerful images the story of Israel's faithlessness, but there is a controversy whether verses 28–29 refer to Israel or to the enemies who are fighting against them because of God's wrath. These verses arguably refer to Israel too, and they intensify Moses' blame once again: 'They are a nation void of sense; there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this; they would discern what the end would be.' In verse 29, חָכָם [to be wise] as well as בִּין [to understand] are used, both roots which we saw in Deuteronomy 4:6 (חָכָם and בִּין).

The Song of Moses is certainly the climax of Moses' blaming Israel, and it is the last piece of divine revelation that he conveys to them, which makes it even more painful. Yet, the issue raised in Deuteronomy 31 and 32 is not completely new. It had already been alluded to in Deuteronomy 4, 28 and 29. Two passages are particularly important for our theme. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses formulates the curses that will come upon those who 'do not obey Yhwh your God by observing faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day' (Dt 28:15). In verse 36, Moses foresees the exile. Being aliens, Israel will face shame amongst the nations, as verse 37 explains: 'You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword amongst all the peoples where Yhwh will lead you.' Moses unfolds exactly this process in more detail in the following chapter, Deuteronomy 29. Deuteronomy 29:22–23 describes the destruction of the land. In verses 24–27, Moses quotes the nations' answer to why God had destroyed the land: 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of Yhwh, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt ...' What Moses announces here is not only malevolent scorn but the worst shame that can come upon Israel: the plain theological truth of their unfaithfulness, as expressed even by other nations.

When it comes to blaming Israel, Moses most often refers to the utmost violation of the Torah, namely the braking of the covenant, which is prefigured paradigmatically in the sin with the Golden Calf (Dt 9f.) and which will be continued in the future (Dt 28–32). In addition, we see the dimension of Israel's shame of abandoning the Torah in the context of the curses relating to the covenant (Dt 28).

## Ethical foundations in the frameworks of Deuteronomy

Most of the passages in which Moses explicitly praises or blames Israel do not occur in the central Law Code, Deuteronomy 12–25, but in the framing discourses which revolve around the main commandment and the covenant. Some of the most prominent occurrences of Moses' rhetoric of praise and blame seem to be deliberately used as framing devices in parallel or antithetical ways. In a parallel way, Moses formulates rhetorical questions regarding Israel's uniqueness with 'who is like' at the beginning of his parenetical speeches (4:7f.), and in the very last verse, he speaks to Israel (at the end of his blessing in Dt 33:29). By way

of contrast, he juxtaposes the wisdom, which Israel receives through the Torah in 4:6 with the foolishness and lack of wisdom shown by their breaking of the covenant in 32:6. An even more sublime contrast may be seen in 4:6 and 29:24. It is only in two passages that Moses quotes foreign nations speaking about Israel, in 4:6 praising them for the wisdom of their Torah and in 29:24 blaming them for breaking the covenant.

In conclusion, Moses employs his rhetoric of praise and blame mainly in the framework of the central Law Code, Deuteronomy 1–11; 26–34. These devices are just one of several dimensions of the complex motivating function of the frameworks of Deuteronomy, which may be called ‘metapragmatical’ (cf. Markl 2011:279f.; Markl 2012:43–45). Praise as well as blame is used to inspire faithfulness to God and obedience to the Torah. Praising and blaming, Moses forms Israel’s ethical identity as the foundation of Israel as a legally constituted nation. By grounding Israel’s self-esteem in the relationship with God and in the Torah, Moses lays the ethical foundations which are to lead them over the Jordan to life in the Promised Land.

## Acknowledgements

It is a privilege for me to dedicate this article to Jurie le Roux, who was a tremendously kind and generous host at the 11th ProPent meeting, where a preliminary version of this article was delivered (Bass Lake, 28 August 2011). The theme of this article may fit the occasion of this Festschrift dedicated to Jurie le Roux, as he is one of those theologians who have successfully worked for the process of transformation within the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa – a transformation that is very much in line with Biblical ethics. I would also like to thank Daniel Côté (London) and Jim Stormes SJ (San Francisco/Nairobi) for proofreading different versions of this article.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## References

- Appiah, K.A., 2010, *The honor code: How moral revolutions happen*, Norton, New York.
- Braulik, G., 1988, ‘Weisheit, Gottesnähe und Gesetz – Zum Kerygma von Deuteronomium 4, 5–8’, in idem, *Studien zur Theologie des Deuteronomiums*, Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände. Altes Testament 2, pp. 53–93, Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart. [= 1977, idem (ed.), *Studien zum Pentateuch*. FS Kornfeld, Herder, Wien, pp. 165–195].
- Braulik, G., 2006, ‘Geschichtserinnerung und Gotteserkenntnis. Zu zwei Kleinformen im Buch Deuteronomium’, in idem, *Studien zu den Methoden der Deuteronomiumsexegese*, Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände. Altes Testament 42, pp. 165–183, Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart. [= 2005, D. Böhler et al. (eds.), *L’Ecrit et l’Esprit*. FS A. Schenker, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 214, Academic Press, Fribourg, pp. 38–57].
- Braulik, G., 2008, ‘Deuteronomium 4 und das gegossene Kalb’, in J. Pakkala & M. Nissinen (eds.), *Houses Full of All Good Things. Essays in Memory of Timo Veijola*, pp. 11–26, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 95, Helsinki.
- Hume, D., 1740, *A treatise of human nature: Being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects*, John Noon, London.
- Lohfink, N., 1990, ‘Dt 26,17–19 und die „Bundesformel“’, in idem, *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur I*, Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände. Altes Testament 8, pp. 211–261, Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart. [= 1969, *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 91, pp. 517–553].
- Markl, D., 2007, *Der Dekalog als Verfassung des Gottesvolkes. Die Brennpunkte einer Rechts hermeneutik des Pentateuch in Exodus 19–24 und Deuteronomium 5*, Herders Biblische Studien 49, Herder, Freiburg i. Br.
- Markl, D., 2011, ‘Deuteronomy’s frameworks in service of the law (Deut 1–11; 26–34)’, in G. Fischer, D. Markl & S. Paganini (eds.), *Deuteronomium – Tora für eine neue Generation*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 17, pp. 271–283, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Markl, D., 2012, *Gottes Volk im Deuteronomium* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte), Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- McBride, S.D., 1993, ‘Polity of the covenant people: The book of Deuteronomy’, in D. Christensen (ed.), *A song of power and the power of song: Essays on the book of Deuteronomy* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 3), pp. 62–77, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake. [=1987, *Interp.* 41, pp. 229–244].
- Otto, E., 2009, ‘Moses Abschiedslied in Deuteronomium 32’, in idem, *Die Tora. Studien zum Pentateuch*, Gesammelte Aufsätze, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 9, pp. 641–678, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Otto, E., 2011, ‘Tora für eine neue Generation in Dtn 4. Die hermeneutische Theologie des Numeruswechsels in Deuteronomium 4,1–40’, in G. Fischer, D. Markl & S. Paganini (eds.), *Deuteronomium – Tora für eine neue Generation*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 17, pp. 107–122, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Smith, A., 1759, *The theory of moral sentiments*, A. Millar, London [see e.g. the edition by D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie, 1976, Clarendon, Oxford].
- Sanders, P., 1996, *The provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, *Oudtestamentische Studien* 37, Brill, Leiden.
- Sonnet, J.P., 2011, ‘Redefining the plot of Deuteronomy – From end to beginning. The import of Dt 34:9’, in G. Fischer, D. Markl & S. Paganini (eds.), *Deuteronomium – Tora für eine neue Generation*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 17, pp. 37–49, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Zipor, M.A., 1996, ‘The Deuteronomic account of the Golden Calf and its reverberation in other parts of the book of Deuteronomy’, *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108, 20–33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/zatw.1996.108.1.20>