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# The Curse of Covenant Reversal: Deuteronomy 28:58-68 and Israel's Exile<sup>1</sup>

Peter M Head

The aim of this paper is to offer an exegetical investigation, along biblical-theology lines, of Deuteronomy 28:58-68. This passage concludes the long second address of Moses which comprises the bulk of Deuteronomy (5:1-28:69 [= ET 29:1]), and describes in some detail the ultimate consequences of Israel's failure to obey YHWH her covenant Lord. At this point in the canonical setting the choice is an open one: the blessings of obedience are set forth in 28:1-14 and the curses of potential disobedience are described somewhat more fully in 28:15-68, climaxing in the vision of exile in verses 58-68. In the following passage (chapters 29 and 30) Moses urges the people of Israel, in view of the redemptive victory of YHWH over Egypt (29:2ff), the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (29:10-15), and the ever present danger of idolatrous apostasy from the living God (29:16ff), to choose obedience to God and the accompanying blessings of life and land and peace:

'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.' (Deut 30:19f)

In view of the importance of the exile, within the Old Testament, as the ultimate expression of YHWH's judgement against covenant-breaking Israel, and in view of the increasing prominence of 'Israel's continuing experience of exile' in recent studies of the thought of post-exilic Judaism and early Christianity, an investigation of this foundational pentateuchal passage is clearly appropriate.<sup>2</sup> In the course of this exegetical essay it will

1 An earlier version of this paper was read at a joint Oak Hill College and Middlesex University seminar on Ethnic Cleansing. It was then entitled 'Israel's experience of exile as ethnic cleansing in reverse'.

2 See, for examples of the latter, M A Knibb 'The Exile in the Literature of the Intertestamental Period' *Heythrop Journal* 1976 pp 253-79; S Talmon 'Waiting for the Messiah: The Spiritual Universe of the Qumran Covenanters' *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* J Neusner, W S Green, E Frerichs edd (Cambridge: CUP 1987) pp 111-137; N T Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK 1992) pp 268-71.

become clear that this passage relates both backwards to the promises given to Abraham and forwards to the renewal of those promises in the renewed hope of the prophets of Israel. The passage thus contains a number of pointers towards important aspects of biblical theology.

After a brief introduction in verse 58, the consequences of Israel's disobedience are spelled out as follows:

- vv 59-61: afflictions, sicknesses, diseases
- v 62: reduction in numbers
- v 63: removal from the land
- vv 64f: scattering among the nations and serving other gods
- vv 65-7: lack of shalom; fear and dread
- v 68: return to slavery in Egypt

Through these verses, as we shall see, 'the speaker unfolds to his audience the manner in which every basic expression of God's covenant love for his people could be reversed'.<sup>3</sup> In other words: 'Since Israel has broken the covenant, Yahweh will abolish all the benefits about which she had boasted (6:21-3; 26:5-9)'.<sup>4</sup> Other passages in Deuteronomy refer, explicitly or implicitly, to the threat of exile,<sup>5</sup> but this passage is the clearest and fullest discussion of the subject. We shall work our way through the passage, investigating the themes highlighted above.

## 1 A Medical Reversal (verses 58-61)

'If you are not careful to do all the words of this law which are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awful name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you. Every sickness also, and every affliction which is not recorded in the book of this law, the Lord will bring upon you, until you are destroyed.' (28:58-61 RSV)

The first consequence of a breaking of covenant obedience is here catalogued in terms of afflictions, sicknesses and diseases. The vocabulary is fairly general: *makāh*, which occurs four times in these verses, refers to an 'affliction' which could take the form of a wound or blow, slaughter, or

3 P C Craigie *The Book of Deuteronomy* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1976) p 351

4 J A Thompson *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP 1974) p 277

5 See Deut 4:26f; 6:15; 7:4; 8:19f; 11:17; 28:36f; 29:27f; 30:18f; cf later Josh 23:13, 16; 1 Kings 9:6f; 2 Kings 17:13-23; 21:10-15.

plague; *h<sup>o</sup>liy*, which is used twice, has the more specific association with sickness or disease. The emphasis in verse 59 is on both the severity of the situation and its duration; note the RSV: ‘afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting’. Verse 60 introduces ‘the diseases of Egypt’ (*maḏwēh mišrayim*); these diseases, although not specified in the narrative of the Exodus, have been mentioned previously in Deuteronomy 7:15. There YHWH promised that in response to Israel’s obedience he would bless and multiply Israel and settle them in the land. As part of this covenantal blessing, it is said: ‘The Lord will take away from you all sickness; and none of the evil diseases of Egypt (*kol maḏwē mišrayim hārā’im*), which you knew, will he inflict upon you, but he will lay them upon all who hate you.’ Redemption and conquest would result in Israel’s freedom from these diseases, but apostasy and the curse of exile would involve a reversal, a removal from the place of divine protection and a return to the diseases of Egypt. The reference in verse 61 to additional sicknesses and afflictions *not* recorded in this book suggests that these ‘diseases of Egypt’ may refer to the diseases that the Lord brought upon Egypt (Exodus 7-12). In this sense, the judgement of calamities in the *land* resembles in part an ‘exodus reversal’, which would be fully realized in Israel’s exile (v 68).<sup>6</sup> The threat of destruction (v 61) is found elsewhere throughout Deuteronomy and is another aspect of the theme of reversal;<sup>7</sup> the same verb (*šmd* [*niphal*] to be destroyed, exterminated) is used elsewhere to describe the destruction of those in the land before Israel, whose destruction would enable Israel to possess the inheritance promised (eg 7:23f; 9:3; 12:30; 31:3f; 33:27).<sup>8</sup>

## 2 A Numerical Reversal (verse 62)

‘Whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude, you shall be left few in number; because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God.’ (28:62)

This verse clearly echoes the very terms of the Abrahamic promise, one essential feature of which was that the descendants of Abraham would be as numerous as ‘the stars of heaven’ (cf Gen 15:5; 22:7; 26:4; Exod 32:13 etc).<sup>9</sup> Within the context of Deuteronomy (cf also Neh 9:23; Heb 11:12)

6 See E H Merrill *Deuteronomy* New American Commentary (Broadman and Holman 1994) p 369.

7 Cf Deut 4:3, 26; 6:15; 7:4; 9:8, 14, 19f, 25; 28:20, 24, 45, 48, 51.

8 The Pentateuch, of course, assumed the rights of Israel’s God over all the world and its inhabitants, and looked to Israel to be the agent of his wrath (see eg Gen 14:16; Deut 7:1ff; 9:1ff, especially v 4: ‘because of the wickedness of these nations’). Ideally Israel should not be motivated by features such as national superiority (Deut 7:7) or higher moral purity (Deut 9:5f) but should accept the land as one part of God’s gracious plan to fulfil the patriarchal promises and her own role as agent of God’s purposes.

9 Expressed more generally in Gen 17:2, 4-8; 22:16ff; 26:3f, 24; 28:3; 35:11f; 38:3f (the terms in which these are expressed occasionally echo the command to multiply in Gen 1:28).

this aspect of the promise, under threat throughout Genesis, is already said to have been fulfilled:

'The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude.' (1:10)

'Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven for multitude.' (10:22)

This passage therefore threatens a reversal for Israel: she had moved, under the blessing of God, from fewness in number to become a great multitude; her apostasy would result in a return to her original position of being 'few in number' (*bimtê m'âf*). Note the use of this expression in the traditional statement: 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number (*bimtê m'âf*); and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous' (Deut 26:5). Thus Israel would revert to a position equivalent to being outside the covenant.

### 3 A Geographical Reversal (verse 63)

'And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you; and you shall be plucked off the land which you are entering to take possession of it.' (28:63)

The basis for the Abrahamic promise was the gracious choice of YHWH to bless Abraham and his descendants and to be their God (Gen 12:2f; 17:7f; 26:24; 28:15; 46:3; cf Lev 26:12). Here this grace is expressed in terms of YHWH's taking delight in Israel (*šus*, 'rejoice', would also be appropriate considering the normal use of the verb in the Psalms and Prophets) in order to do her good and multiply her. The notion of YHWH doing Israel good is found very clearly in Jacob's prayer: 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who didst say to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good," I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant ...' (Gen 32:10f = ET 32:9f; cf 40:14; Num 10:29, 32). In Deuteronomy this is focused on experiencing the blessings of the land, as the destination of Israel's journey (cf especially 8:14-16) and is often expressed conditionally upon Israel's obedience (eg Deut 4:40; 5:16, 29; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28). In the threatened curse YHWH's delight in doing Israel good is transformed into YHWH's delight in judgement; the possibility of a further future reversal is held out in Deuteronomy 30:9 (cf Jer 32:41).

In addition to the promise of a multitude of descendants, a further essential feature of the Abrahamic promise related to possession of a land in which they could live (Gen 12:1, 7; 15:7; 17:8; cf also Exod 1:7; 32:13). Repeated references within the book of Deuteronomy highlight the position of the people on the verge of entry into that land (cf 7:1ff; 8:1ff; 30:5, 16).<sup>10</sup> One of the primary interests of the historical works which follow is the question of the fulfilment of these promises, especially in relation to the land (eg Josh 1:6, 15 etc; Josh 3: the ark of the covenant symbolizes the presence of God leading his people into the Land; Josh 21:43-5 for a summary).

This threat thus involves *both* removal from the land (cf also 4:26 for a similar earlier threat) *and* ruin and destruction. These latter two terms are both evocative. The term for 'ruin' (*'āḥad*, used in similar threats elsewhere in Deuteronomy<sup>11</sup>) is used elsewhere to describe the state of Egypt suffering under God's judgement (Exod 10:7; cf Deut 11:4), the ruin and destruction that will be wrought upon the previous occupants of the land (Deut 7:20, 24; 9:3), and is regularly used in promises of judgement whereby Israelites would be treated like outsiders (if someone works on the day of atonement, 'that person I will destroy from among his people' Lev 23:30; cf 26:38). The term for 'destruction' (*šmd*) was already used in verse 61 and we discussed it briefly above. As Merrill noted: 'Decrease in population and eviction from the land answer point by point (and in the same order) the matching blessings of number and land in the original promise passages (Gen 15:5-7; 17:4-8).'<sup>12</sup>

#### 4 A National and Religious Reversal (verse 64)

'And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.' (28:64)

Here the threatened judgement involves both a scattering among the nations (vv 64a, 65) and a serving of the 'other gods', the gods of the nations. The peculiar identity of Israel as the people of YHWH will apparently be dissolved, as the God who called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees will send his apostate descendants back to the idolatrous nations from which he came (cf Josh 24:14). Within Deuteronomy the nations and the other gods are closely associated; for example, the peoples of the nations are a continued threat to the purity of Israel's monotheistic faith;

<sup>10</sup> Cf D J A Clines *The Theme of the Pentateuch* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 10 (Sheffield: JSOT Press 1978) pp 31-60 (chapters five and six).

<sup>11</sup> Deut 4:26; 8:19f; 11:17; 28:20, 22, 51; 30:18

<sup>12</sup> E H Merrill *Deuteronomy* New American Commentary (Broadman and Holman 1994) p 371; cf earlier M G Kline *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1963) p 129.

hence they must be destroyed and not married 'for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods' (7:4). Those who would entice Israel away from their redeeming Lord to other gods, the gods of the nations, must be put to death (13:6-11). These gods are repeatedly characterized as previously unknown within Israel: 'Neither you nor your fathers have known [them]' (13:6; cf vv 13; 28:36, 64; cf Jer 16:13; 44:3).

The peculiar relationship of Israel to her Lord was summarized in the opening words of the decalogue which unite the redemption from Egypt with the total avoidance of idolatry (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7; cf 6:13f). Warnings to maintain this unique loyalty to the one true God were repeated often in the historical books of the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> Looking back from the other side of God's judgement Jeremiah echoes this passage closely:

And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, 'Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?' then you shall say to them: 'Because your fathers have forsaken me, says the Lord, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me; therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.' (Jer 16:10-13; cf 44:2ff, especially v 3)

The terminology of scattering (*pûš [hiphil]*) is regularly associated with the judgement of exile, although not without notes of hope for a re-gathering.<sup>14</sup> The scattering of Israel relates to their removal from the land; while the terminology echoes the scattering of humanity after Babel (Gen 11:8f), perhaps implying once more that Israel will reflect the state of humanity before God made his promises to Abraham.

## 5 A Dreadful Reversal (verses 65-7)

'And among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot; but the Lord will give you there a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and a languishing soul; your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, "Would it were evening!" and at evening you shall say, "Would it

13 Cf eg Deut 8:19; 11:16; Josh 23:16 cf 24:16; 1 Kings 9:6f = 2 Chron 7:19.

14 Cf eg Neh 1:8; Jer 9:16; Ezek 11:16f; 12:15; 20:23; 22:15; 36:19.

were morning!” because of the dread which your heart shall fear, and the sights which your eyes shall see.’ (28:65-7)

In this case the heading is an attempt to catch the feeling of Israel’s position ‘among the nations’ as one of fear and dread; attention is drawn throughout to the lack of ease, rest and assurance, and the presence of fear and dread. S R Driver described it in the following terms:

A powerful and graphic description of Israel’s condition in exile: no peace or rest; never-ceasing anxiety and suspense; life in perpetual jeopardy: the present unendurable because fraught with peril, the future filled by the imagination with undefined terrors.<sup>15</sup>

Within the context of Deuteronomy Moses had previously held out the prospect of occupying the land as an experience of rest (*nūah*) in the land (3:20) and from Israel’s enemies so that they might live in safety (12:10; 25:19).<sup>16</sup> The threat of exile will involve a reversal and a removal of this condition of rest and tranquillity in the land. The image of lack of rest for the sole of one’s foot evokes the overturning of the blessing of conquest,<sup>17</sup> and suggests a consequent lack of security.<sup>18</sup> Like ‘trembling heart’ and ‘languishing soul’, the image of failing eyes is an expression of hopelessness (cf Job 11:20: ‘But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last’; Ps 38:10; 119:82, 123 [waiting for salvation]; Lam 4:17). The fear and dread which the Lord laid upon the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus (Exod 15:16; cf Num 22:3) and the inhabitants of the land at the time of the conquest (Deut 2:25; 11:25) will, in the exile, be laid upon the people of Israel under YHWH’s hand of judgement (as also Lev 26:16), thus bringing to pass the very thing that Moses spoke against (in Deut 1:29; 7:21; 20:3; 31:6).

## 6 A Redemptive Reversal (verse 68)

‘And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey which I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall

15 S R Driver *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1895) p 318

16 Cf C M Carmichael *The Laws of Deuteronomy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1974) pp 118-133. This language is picked up again in 2 Samuel 7, which records the situation under David as one in which ‘the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies round about’ (v 1; cf v 10f).

17 Deut 11:24; Josh 1:3; Ezek 43:7; Mal 4:3; cf E H Merrill *Deuteronomy* New American Commentary (Broadman and Holman 1994) p 371.

18 Cf Lam 1:3: ‘Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress’ (cf Deut 11:24).



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offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no man will buy you.' (28:68)

Here in the climactic conclusion to the passage the pattern of reversal reaches to the very act of God's redemption: Israel would return to slavery in Egypt (cf Exod 14:13; Deut 17:16). This expresses a fundamental reversal of Israel's exodus: YHWH returns them to Egypt, although in a worse state than before because no one will even buy them as slaves.<sup>19</sup> Here Israel is threatened with a judgement that would overturn the very moment which defined her salvation and existence as the people of YHWH.<sup>20</sup> The prophets later picked up this motif in many passages, interpreting the exile as a return to Egypt; see Hosea 8:13b: 'Now he will remember their iniquity, and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt' (cf already Is 27:13 Assyria and Egypt; Jer 42:14-17; Hos 9:3, 6; 11:5).

### Conclusion

We have seen sufficient evidence to affirm this general conclusion: the blessings promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, blessings enjoyed in part or in whole during Israel's occupation of the land, would be taken away in an act of judgement should Israel fail to maintain exclusive covenant loyalty to YHWH. Israel's health, peace, property, prosperity, numbers and status would all be relinquished in the exile and scattering among the nations. G von Rad commented on this passage:

Evidently Deuteronomy sees in these events something like a divine liquidation of the whole history of salvation brought about by Yahweh, that is to say, a termination of that road on which, according to the word of Yahweh, already referred to in Deuteronomy 17:16, no return would ever be made.<sup>21</sup>

Deuteronomy, however, never proclaims that YHWH in this act of judgement will relinquish his love for Israel. Although clearly envisaging Israel's choice of the way of disobedience, Deuteronomy holds out the hope of a future restoration of Israel in which the curse of covenant reversal will be reversed once more and the people will be restored to the land, where a re-gathering and re-population will take place, based on a

19 A D H Mayes *Deuteronomy* New Century Bible Commentary (London: Oliphants 1979) p 358. On the difficulty raised by the mention of ships see D G Schley Jr "'Yahweh Will Cause You to Return to Egypt in Ships" (Deuteronomy XXVIII 68)' *Vetus Testamentum* 35 1985 pp 369-72. Cf also more recently D J Reimer 'Concerning Return to Egypt: Deuteronomy XVII 16 and XXVIII 68 Reconsidered' *Studies in the Pentateuch* J A Emerton ed *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 41 (Leiden: E J Brill 1990) pp 217-229.

20 Cf Exod 20:2 etc; 29:46; Deut 26:5-11; and in later passages: Josh 24:16ff (covenant renewal); 1 Kings 6:1; 8:9, 21, 51, 53; Neh 9:9ff (Ezra); Ps 81:10; Hos 11:1ff etc.

21 G von Rad *Deuteronomy* Old Testament Library (London: SCM 1966) p 176

heart circumcision (30:2-6). In this respect Deuteronomy lays the foundation for the prophetic expectations of salvation as involving a restoration of the land, the peace, the prosperity, the health and the religious life of Israel through a divine act of redemption described in terms of a second exodus and a new covenant.<sup>22</sup>

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22 Precisely these expectations were claimed by writers of the New Testament to have been met and fulfilled in the New Covenant work of Christ and the Spirit. It is hoped that some of these lines of expectation and fulfilment may be traced in future studies.