The Legal Characterization of Moses in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch

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The force of law depends on the authority of its promulgator. Self-characterizations by lawgivers play a vital role in persuading hearers and readers to accept law and in motivating them to obey it. Pentateuchal laws therefore join narratives in characterizing law-speakers as part of a rhetoric of persuasion. They present, however, two speakers of law, one divine (YHWH) and the other human (Moses). I will show that this dual voicing of pentateuchal law has two effects: it restricts Deuteronomy's prophetic characterization of Moses to the narrower definition of prophecy presented in the previous books, while it uses Moses' scribal role to present a unifying rhetoric of divine law.

1 Classical theorists of rhetoric recognized self-characterization, the speaker's ethos, as crucial to persuasion. Aristotle argued that "persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. . . . This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak" (Rhetoric I.2.1356a; trans. W. B. Roberts in R. McKeon, ed., The Basic Works of Aristotle [New York: Random House, 1941]; for an application of classical theory to Deuteronomy, see Timothy A. Lenchak, "Choose Life!" A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28.69–30.20 [AnBib 129; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1993] 58 and passim).

I. The Voice of a King?

Despite the different speakers of pentateuchal law, the contents of their speeches sound quite similar. Like God, Moses speaks law, most fully and explicitly in Deuteronomy. Like the divine instructions in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy combine genre elements from treaties, law codes, and commemorative inscriptions into a persuasive appeal for obedience to God's Torah. In the preceding books, the royal provenance of these genres in the ancient Near East characterizes YHWH as an ideal ruler. They therefore lead us to expect that Deuteronomy characterizes Moses as a king also.

The book certainly presents a forceful characterization. The speeches repeatedly call attention to their speaker, from Moses' autobiographical review of his service to God and Israel and his suffering as a result ("YHWH was angry with me because of you"), through his urgent appeals for fidelity and obedience to his words ("... that I am commanding you today"), to his threats of legal sanctions for noncompliance ("I call heaven and earth to witness against you today ..."). Moses recalls the narrative setting of the speech at the end of his own life (Num 27:12–23; Deut 31:14–16; 32:49–52; 34:1–12) within the speech itself (3:27–28; 4:22), evoking sympathy to reinforce the persuasive force of his authority. Deuteronomy presents the most powerful self-characterization of any human speaker in the Hebrew Bible.

Does Moses depict himself in royal terms? Royal motifs shape parts of his biography, most obviously at his birth, and evoke comparisons with heroic sagas as a king also.

Mosaic law implicitly (and Deuteronomy 1710 explicitly) sets standards for Israel's rulers. Moses fulfills the otherwise royal roles of national leader and highest court of appeal. Moses can therefore be interpreted as a type or example of Israel's ideal king. The biblical tradition, however, tends to contrast kings with Moses, as Joel Rosenberg noted:

If Moses and David are in some respects parallel figures, they are, in other respects, polar opposites: Moses was a reluctant leader, David an ambitious one; Moses was humble, David self-promoting; Moses clumsy of tongue, David a maker of songs and a genius of public relations; Moses a prophet who challenged a king, David a king who subverted the institutions of the prophets. Moses' grave-site is unknown, David's is Mt. Zion; Moses yielded to a successor from another tribe, David sired a dynasty; Moses wished for collective leadership (Num 11:29); David centralized it; Moses administered before a traveling sanctuary, David planned a permanent one. Most notably, Israel's kings never give law. The law comes from YHWH through Moses, a tradition that emphasizes Moses' uniqueness precisely in comparison with Israel's kings. Stories about Moses' humility (Exod 3:11–4:17; Num 12:3) show his lack of royal pretensions and, together with references to his mistakes (Num 20:12; Deut 32:51), also contrast him with that other pentateuchal lawgiver, YHWH. Though Moses' self-characterization in Deuteronomy is neither humble nor apologetic, it stops short of royal self-aggrandizement. By invoking his impending death, the speeches set a dominant tone of final adoration and self-justification. Deuteronomy's testamentary view backward and forward in time suggests comparison not so much with the royal inscriptive genres of laws, treaties, etc. as with the ancient genres of religious autobiogra-
II. The Voice of a Prophet

Moses in Deuteronomy agrees with the narrative of Exodus-Numbers in claiming to possess a delegated authority to give the law to Israel. Like the narrator, Moses notes two sources for that delegated authority: YHWH and Israel itself. On the one hand, YHWH commissioned Moses to hear and report the law (Deut 4:14; 5:28–31; 18:15–18; cf. Exod 19:9); on the other hand, the people asked Moses to mediate between themselves and God (Deut 5:23–27; cf. Exod 20:18–20). Moses therefore claims double authorization to speak for God to Israel in lawgiving. Perhaps this also grounds his authority to speak for Israel to God in intercession. Deuteronomy 27 may illustrate the mediator’s double role with co-speakers to distinguish the functions: Moses and the elders (v. 1) pronounced the performative speech for Israel in the covenant ceremony, while Moses and the levitical priests (v. 9) speak for YHWH. This double delegation of authority to Moses maximizes his rhetorical power in Deuteronomy. When both God and Israel have appointed him to speak for them, who is left to challenge his words?

Mediation comprises the essence of the prophetic role for Deuteronomy. In Deut 18:15–22, Moses presents himself as the first of a line of prophets who, by virtue of the authority delegated by the people (“you”) as well as YHWH (vv. 16–17), will speak for God to Israel. Deuteronomy thus defines prophets by comparison with Moses, and so turns the statement “Moses was a prophet” into a tautology.

The larger Pentateuch, however, provides a different depiction of prophecy, which situates the speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy relative to the preceding words of God. The Pentateuch does not use prophetic vocabulary and rhetorical forms very often. Except for two places in Deuteronomy (18:15, 18; 34:10), it never calls Moses a prophet. Num 12:6 contrasts God’s direct revelation of law to Moses with the visionary experiences of prophets. Nor does Moses use the messenger formulas typical of prophets when he delivers laws to Israel, either in Exodus-Numbers or in Deuteronomy. Moses sounds most like other Israelite prophets when his divine message consists of warnings and threats. In the plague stories, the messenger formula regularly introduces YHWH’s threats against Egypt (Exod 7:17; 7:26 [Eng. 8:1]; etc.), which Aaron


19 When the word “prophet” does appear, it applies to a variety of phenomena: Abraham’s intercession (Gen 20:7), Aaron’s role vis-à-vis Moses (Exod 7:1), Miriam’s singing the victory song at the sea (Exod 15:20), and the ecstatic behavior of the elders (Num 11:25–29). Balaam, the most obviously “prophetic” character in the Pentateuch after Moses, like Moses receives no title but describes himself as a visionary (Num 24:3–4, 15–16).
"your prophet" (7:1) delivers and implements. And in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43), Moses deploys a full complement of prophetic vocabulary and rhetorical forms to predict Israel’s faithlessness and YHWH's punishment. Like the prophetic books, the Song presents a stronger characterization of YHWH (who emerges as quoted speaker in 32:20–27, 34–35, 37–42) than of Moses. Nevertheless, it does place Moses literally among prophets such as Isaiah and Hosea.

I have argued elsewhere that the rhetorical structuring of the whole Pentateuch casts Deuteronomy as the concluding sanctions to the preceding stories (Genesis–Exodus 19) and lists (Exodus 20–Numbers). A separate voice dominates each element in this very general schema: the anonymous narrator tells the stories, YHWH gives most of the lists, and Moses pronounces the sanctions. The numerous exceptions in detail should not be allowed to obscure the overall rhetorical dominance of each voice within its own sphere.

This pentateuchal distribution of voices and roles categorizes Moses’ speech in Deuteronomy as prophetic threat and promise, and characterizes Moses as a more typical prophet than the book read alone suggests. The Pentateuch’s rhetoric appropriates elements within Deuteronomy, such as its self-description as “blessing and curse” (11:26; 30:19) and its poetic climax in the threats of chap. 32 followed by the blessings of “Moses’ Last Words” in chap. 33, for use in a larger pattern, which emphasizes a narrow understanding of Moses’ prophetic role. Deuteronomy 32–33 reminds readers of the Pentateuch of other large poems of sanction. Jacob’s Blessing (Genesis 49) brings Genesis to a climax with an oracular combination of promise and threat. Balaam, the only professional visionary in the Pentateuch, delivers two chapters of poetic blessings though hired to pronounce curses (Numbers 22–24). All these poems appear before major transitions in the Pentateuch’s plot: the death of Jacob and the end of the ancestral stories in Genesis 50, the death of the Exodus generation in Numbers 25–26, the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34. Together with the stories of Moses and Aaron delivering God’s threats against Egypt, these pentateuchal parallels to Deuteronomy categorize Moses’ words as prophetic sanctions. As a result, the larger pentateuchal context takes Moses the lawgiver found in Deuteronomy read apart from what precedes it (and also in Exodus 24 read alone) and makes him just a prophet—uniquely great, the exemplar of the prophetic office to be sure, but not a rhetorical competitor with the divine lawgiver of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Moses instead completes the Pentateuch’s rhetorical strategy by prophetically announcing the consequences of obeying and disobeying God’s previously stated laws.

Calum M. Carmichael provided a comparison between Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy and argued that the latter is modeled on the former (The Laws of Deuteronomy [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974] 23–25).

Discussion of Balaam’s role has focused either on what kind of Mesopotamian diviner he is (for summaries, see M. S. Moore, The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 98, 104–9; Jacob Milgrom, Numbers [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990] 471–73) or how Israel’s traditions, especially E and the Deuteronomists, shaped an increasingly negative characterization of him (Wilson, Prophecy and Society, 147–50). The poems’ roles in the wider context of Numbers was analyzed by Dennis T. Olson (Death of the Old and Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch [JS 71J: Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985] 153–64).

I am grateful to my student Kenneth Carmen for elucidating the significance of this pattern.

Blenkinsopp noted that Deuteronomy defines prophecy institutionally, so that “the principal function of the prophet is now to proclaim the law and warn against the consequences of nonobservance, and the same function is amply illustrated in Dtr (e.g., 2 Kings 17:13)” (Pentateuch, 233). The Pentateuch as a whole emphasizes the second element (warnings of consequences) in its shaping of Mosaic prophecy, while subordinating the first (lawgiving) to the dominant divine voice of Exodus–Numbers.

Note that the celebration of Moses’ uniqueness which concludes the Pentateuch (Deut 34:10–12) emphasizes his miracles. The laws are not mentioned!

These observations suggest, of course, looking for explanations in the historical situation and redactional steps by which Deuteronomy was combined with the rest of the Pentateuch. Rhetorical theory in fact requires that attention be given to the real speakers and audience, writers, editors, and readers, as well as their depictions within a speech or text. Synchronic description should precede diachronic analysis, however, to guard against confusing literary techniques with editorial revisions (for recent arguments for the necessity of starting with the text as we have it, see Blenkinsopp, Pentateuch, 184, 194; Kienzler, Task, 368–69). Therefore for reasons of space, this essay is restricted to the first, synchronic step; diachronic studies are nevertheless necessary to complete an analysis of the Pentateuch’s rhetoric.
The Pentateuch then does not present itself on the whole as "the law of Moses," but rather as "the law of YHWH." God speaks the law and God alone. Moses announces its consequences, as did Israel's lesser prophets.

III. The Voice of a Scribe

Deuteronomy's rhetoric calls attention to the Pentateuch's other dominant characterization of Moses as teacher and scribe. The language of sanctions aims at motivation, a key concern of the wisdom literature, with which Deuteronomy has much in common. The book also emphasizes law and interpretation (1:5; 4:1, 10; 5:1; 6:6–9, 20) as necessary to obedience. Thus, Deuteronomy displays law as instruction and Moses as the paradigmatic instructor. Toward the end the emphasis shifts from speaking ("that I am commanding you today") to texts ("the words of this law that are written in this book" [28:58; 30:10]; "the curses in this book" [28:61; 29:19–20 (Eng. 29:20–21, 27)]. Moses appears as transcriber (31:9, 19, 22, 24; a role he also plays in Exod 24:4; 34:27–28) and urges Israel to follow his example (Deut 17:18; 27:3, 8).

Moses thus exemplifies the ancient scribe who records, teaches, and interprets. In writing as in speaking, he repeats what he has heard, but he also interprets and composes outright. Deuteronomy 31–32 provides a concise example of this lack of distinction between the scribal roles of author and transcriber: YHWH instructs Moses to write "this song" (31:19), which Moses voices in the first person (32:1–3) yet which quotes YHWH extensively (32:20–27, 34–35, 37–42). The same process describes Deuteronomy as a whole: Moses claims authority delegated from both YHWH and the people to proclaim laws as first-person commands, yet as YHWH's commandments (thus, e.g., "Listen to the voice of YHWH your God and do his commandments and ordinances which I am commanding you today" [27:10]). Author, editor, and publisher unite in Moses the scribe, yet the lawgiver remains YHWH alone.

How does this scribal characterization of Moses affect the contradictions between Deuteronomy and preceding pentateuchal law codes? Moses can be quite bold in his modifications of previously given narrative, legal, and theological traditions. For example, he omits to mention his own mistakes in the wilderness, blaming the people for his death sentence instead (cf. Moses' claims in Deut 1:37; 3:26; 4:21–22 with YHWH's version in 32:51). Moses modifies the laws regarding the location of altars and the possibility of secular slaughter (Deut 12:13–27) and provides new legislation regarding kings (17:14–20). The most blatant theological example is his denial of multi-generational retribution in 7:9–10, a key idea for YHWH's self-characterizations in Exod 20:5–6 and 34:6–7.

It must be noted that contradictions mar Moses' own teaching and scribal work since conflicts appear within Deuteronomy itself. For example, one should judge the legitimacy of prophets by their predictive accuracy according to 18:21–22 (Moses quoting YHWH), but by their doctrinal orthodoxy according to 13:1–4 (Eng. 12:32–13:3) (Moses alone). Polzin argued that God's direct discourse in chap. 18 overrules Moses' indirect report in chap. 13, and that the two texts represent conflicting tendencies found throughout the book. This contradiction differs, however, from those listed above in that Moses voices both versions, only in one case quoting YHWH directly (though the original statement goes unrecorded in the Pentateuch), in the other not. Thus Moses remains the authority for both rulings.

Moses in Deuteronomy, like YHWH in Exodus-Numbers, gives voice to changing and incommensurate legal traditions. Contradiction in pentateuchal narratives is thus allowed, because Moses is the inspired author of both the law and the covenant history embodied in them. Moses is the only one who saw what the finger of God had written on the first set of tablets before they were broken; the correspondence with the second set, which he wrote at God's dictation, preserves his faithfulness as an intermediary and scribe ("Like Unto Moses, 60)."

On the latter, see Watts, "Legal Characterization of God," 9–11; for the process of interpretation at work in Deut 7:9–10, see Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation, 436; and Levinson, "Human Voice," 53–56.


Deuteronomy 12 therefore presents no exception to Polzin's observation that Deuteronomy 12–26, unlike its framework, tends "to raise the authority of the Mosaic voice to a position almost indistinguishable from that of the voice of God. Conversely, in this address the direct voice of God is almost totally silenced" (Moses, 55). Similarly, Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation, 436 and 437.

Olson explained the difficulties by means of a theological rationale based in Deut 28:69's distinction between a Horeb covenant and a Moab covenant. The former "deconstructs
law does not pose a conflict between YHWH and Moses so much as it authorizes legal change as a natural part of Torah. The very nature of Deuteronomy, a "second law" delivered to a new generation in Moab, highlights the role of reinterpretation and reapplication in legal and religious traditions. A unique introduction to Moses' speech emphasizes this function: נְמָלֶק הָאָרֶץ אֲבָדָא דָּרָא הָהֵמוּר, "Moses clarified this law, saying" (Deut 1:5). The scribal character of Moses' voice emerges precisely in his mastery of the tradition to present it in a new form, as Fishbane argued:

The very fact that the traditions are represented on the Plains of Moab to the post-exodus generation is emblematic of the fundamental trope of instruction basic to aggadic exegesis—that the traditions have to be retracted and revised in each generation. . . . It is the Torah, which for Deut 1:5 as for Ps 78:5 . . . means the entirety of the traditions—the historical, the hortatory, and the legal.  

Indeed, awareness of change creates concern for the tradition's integrity within Deuteronomy itself, which contains the only pentateuchal injunctions against modifications (13:1 [Eng. 12:32]). The tension between this prohibition and the character of the book that contains it may be intended to highlight the issue, as Polzin suggested. Or, since a scribe's authority depends on claims to itself through the ambiguities of its own statutes and ordinances that shipwreck in the end upon the curses of Deuteronomy 28. . . . The Moab covenant [Deuteronomy 29-32] does not negate but decenters the Horeb covenant with an emphasis on the judging and saving action of God in the face of the failure and limitation of human obedience. Thus, Yahweh will be the one who will create obedience through the strategies of the Moab covenant, an obedience that humans could not achieve under the Horeb covenant (compare Deut 10:16; 30:6). Yet the Horeb covenant remains in effect and humans continue to struggle, however imperfectly, toward obedience through the strategies of the Moab covenant, an obedience that humans could not achieve under the Horeb covenant (compare Deut 10:16; 30:6). Yet the Horeb covenant remains in effect and humans continue to struggle, however imperfectly, toward faithfulness" (Deuteronomy, 176). Olson's interpretation employs narrative development (from Horeb to Moab) to explain legal change, forcing law to conform to narrative conventions of genre (for a critique of this strategy when applied to the golden calf story and the priestly legislation, see James W. Watts, "Public Readings and Pentateuchal Law," VT 45 [1995] 550–51). Legal explanations for differences and change accord better with Deuteronomy's instructional genre and produce a very different rhetorical result: interpretation of law makes obedience very possible indeed. Lohfink provided a reading more compatible with the book's genre by arguing that Deuteronomy 5–28 and 29–30 represent the same Moab covenant depicted from the two different perspectives of the covenant document and the covenant ritual respectively (Lohfink, "Bund als Vertrag," 229–33).

Watts, Moses in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch
voices of the Pentateuch thus become interdependent and almost interchangeable: the anonymous narrator, like Moses the scribe, requires both divine inspiration and reader acceptance for authorization of the story; the divine lawgiver depends on reader acceptance of human mediation of the commandments; the prophetic scribe depends on authority delegated by both God and readers to interpret the stories, the laws, and the sanctions. No wonder the Pentateuch's rhetoric led tradition to claim both divine and Mosaic authorship of the whole.