

Parashah One Hundred and Forty-Nine

Deuteronomy 32:1–52; Habakkuk 3:8–19; Revelation 15:1–8

notes by Tim Hegg

The Song of Moses

The *parashah* for this Shabbat is the Song of Moses, usually called שִׁירַת הָאָזִינוּ, *Shirat Ha'azinu* (“Song of ‘Give Ear’”) taken from the first words of the poem. It contains the words of the Song written by Moses as God had instructed (31:19), but the words were given to Moses by God Himself. For He commands him, “Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel...” The fact that the text says “this song” (הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת) indicates that the words (or perhaps the general outline of the Song’s contents) were given to Moses by God.

According to 31:19, the Song was initially given to Israel as a legal witness, indicating that it functioned within the context of God’s covenant with them: “teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel.” It was to stand as a witness to the nation as they were about to enter the Land of what the consequences of their rebellion would be, as a call for Israel to be faithful, and of God’s own enduring faithfulness to the covenant. By this we are to be reminded that the Torah as a covenant between God (as the Great King) and Israel (as His vassal) was a two-sided covenant. Though the covenant would endure throughout Israel’s generations, each generation would enjoy the blessings of the covenant only when they were faithful to it. For the covenant contained the blessings and the curses (Deut 11:26–29; 27:13ff).

Poetry, by its very nature, often resists language and syntax updating. This is the case with the Song of Moses. Our text contains some old Hebrew vocabulary and some indications of older syntax. As such, it has presented translators with difficulties, including the translators of the Lxx. Fortunately, Hebrew poetry is built on parallelism, so often when a word in one line is obscure, its parallel line helps define it. Indeed, throughout the Song, we should carefully note the manner in which the poetic parallelism offers insight into the meaning of the words. The opening verses (1–3) call heaven and earth as witnesses to the Song’s message and its covenant significance. The words of Moses are compared to rain, dew, and droplets on fresh grass, for the Torah is that which nourishes and fosters growth. Moreover, the words of Torah are refreshing to the soul.

To “proclaim the Name of Adonai” (שִׁים יְהוָה, v. 3) means to declare His qualities, as the parallel line shows: “Ascribe greatness to our God.” This is echoed by the Psalmist (105:1), “Oh give thanks to Adonai, call upon His Name; Make known His deeds among the peoples.”

Verse 4 describes God as “The Rock” (צוּר, *tzur*). The word צוּר refers to a “cliff” or “mountain” and pictures a rock fortress on high ground in which safety may be found. The word is used seven times to describe God in the poem. It is used in v. 13, “And He made him suck honey from the rock (סֶלֶעַ, *selah*), And oil from the flinty rock (צוּר).” Here, though the word צוּר does not refer directly to God, it may be used to indicate that the provision of food throughout the wilderness wanderings were directly from the hand of God. The point of using the word seven times directly as a description of God, however, is to remind Israel that her only sure place of protection is in God Himself.

The first description of God (v. 4) pertains to His complete perfection: “His work is perfect (תָּמִים, *tamim*),” that is, “blameless,” “without any flaws” for “All His ways are just (מִשְׁפָּט, *mishpat*). He is “faithful” (אֱמוּנָה, *emunah*), which means He always keeps His word, “He is never false” (עָוֵל, *avel*, “iniquity” or “dishonest”). Rather, He is “righteous” (צַדִּיק, *tzaddik*) and “up-

right” (יָשָׁר, *yashar*).

Israel, on the other hand, is described in stark contrast to the perfections of the Almighty (v. 5). In the Hebrew, this verse consists of four designations which contrast the previous characteristics of God: (1) שִׁחֵת, *shicheit*, “corrupt” (2) לֹא לוֹ בָנִים, “He has no children” (3) מוּמָם, *mumam*, “defect” (4) דֹּר עֲקֹשׁ, *dor ‘iqeish*, “corrupt generation” (5) פְּתִילְתָל, *f’taltol*, “crooked.”

Having made this stark contrast, the following section (vv. 6–14) of the Song expresses the incredulity of Israel in despising the goodness of God toward them. He redeemed and established them as His people (v. 6). Moses calls Israel to remember her history (v. 7) and the abundant lovingkindness shown to her by God. Indeed, God’s determinations of the world’s nations was done with Israel in mind, giving her priority (v. 8). As Calvin notes: “In the whole arrangement of the world God had kept this before Him as the end: to consult the interests of His chosen people” (*Comm. on Deut 32*). Interestingly, the Lxx has something different in this verse: “When the Most High divided the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God.” Here, ἀγγέλων θεοῦ, “angels of God” replaces the Hebrew בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “sons of Israel” but it seems out of place in the context, for Moses is expressing God’s favor to Israel. One fragment in the Qumran Scrolls (4QDeut^f=4Q37^f) has another reading: בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, “sons of God.” It may be that the Lxx had this reading before them, for in some places, the word אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim* is translated by the Lxx with the word “angels” (Ps 8:5[Lxx 8:6]; 97:7[Lxx 96:7]; 138:1[Lxx 137:1]. In fact, in Job 38:7, בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, “sons of God” is translated in the Lxx by ἄγγελοί μου, “My angels,” and in Job 1:6 and 2:1, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים is translated by οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ, “the angels of God” in the Lxx. That an early Hebrew text of Deut 32:8 had בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, “sons of God” as a reference to Israel therefore seems quite possible, and this would fit the overall context of the Song, in which God is seen as Israel’s Father, the One Who “gave you birth” (v. 18).

Thus, in ordering the world for the sake of Israel, God declares that she is “His portion” and the “allotment of His inheritance” (v. 9). This inheritance language means that He has chosen to “dwell” among Israel. The following verses (vv. 10–14) then describe the tender mercies shown to Israel. Lost and wandering in the desert, He rescued her and guided her as the “pupil of His eye” (cf. Zech 2:8). Using the metaphor of an eagle carrying its young (v. 11), teaching them to fly, so God carried Israel as His own offspring, as a mother caring for her babies. In this tender care, He gave Israel the fatness of the land, feeding her with the finest foods. Even where food seemed scarce (as in the desert), He provided “honey from the rock and oil from the flinty rock” (v. 13). Thus, Israel had all she needed because the Almighty provided for them in every way.

One would think that having been so privileged, Israel would respond with thankfulness and gratitude. Instead, growing “fat” and selfish, “Yeshurun kicked,” meaning Israel rebelled, for she was self-absorbed: “You are grown fat, thick, and sleek,” adjectives that describe affluence and self-centeredness (v. 15). Why does Moses use the name Yeshurun here instead of Israel? As an alternative name for “Israel,” the name Yeshurun (יֵשׁוּרֻן) is formed on the verb יָשָׁר, *yashar*, “to be upright” and may give some indication of the original meaning of “Israel” (יִשְׂרָאֵל), for in the earliest stages of Hebrew, the שׁ (*sheen*) and שׁ (*seen*) were not differentiated. Thus, the name “Israel” might mean “upright of God.” The name Yeshurun is found only four times in the Tanach (Deut 32:15; 33:5, 26; Is 44:2). In each case, the name Yeshurun is in the context of God’s care for Israel, and His covenant relationship with her. Thus, its appearance in the Song stresses the fact that Israel should be forever grateful for all the mercies shown to her by the Almighty, and thus highlights how dreadful it is that she instead despises His acts of kindness.

But the Song takes Israel's sin even further. Not only have we been ungrateful for God's bountiful care and mercy, but we have turned to idols, giving the honor due only to God to false gods that are the product of man's imaginations and even worse, the counterfeit "deities" of demons (vv. 16–18). These "no-gods" are "gods-come-lately," they are therefore counterfeit in every way because the one and only God is eternal, without beginning or end. In attempting to create a pantheon of gods, thinking to add gods to the list that includes the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Israel actually rejected God, because worshipping Him requires a confession of His unique status as the *only* God. Idolatry, by its very nature, is a denial of God, for in acknowledging Him as God, all others by definition are excluded.

As a result of Israel's rebellion and idolatry, God administers His stern punishment: "For whom Adonai loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights" (Prov 3:12). He "hides His face from them" (v. 20), meaning that His protective presence and bountiful provision is removed (cf. the Aaronic benediction, Num 6:22–26). As such, Israel becomes vulnerable to her enemies, and God becomes a consuming fire rather than a fortress of protection. Verse 21 contains a vivid contrast: "They have vexed Me with 'no-gods'...I will vex them with a 'no-nation,' with a foolish nation I will anger them." God would use nations never privileged to know Him through the Torah, themselves given over to the foolishness of idolatry, to punish Israel. So intense is God's righteous indignation toward Israel that entirely wiping away the wayward nation would seem warranted, except for one obvious truth: to do so would go contrary to His own glory and sovereignty. Yet the manner in which the Song expresses this caveat is surprising. Moses does not here emphasize the covenant promises made by God to Israel, but instead he centers on the pride of the nations that God would use to punish Israel. In giving her enemies the victory, these pagan nations would undoubtedly ascribe such victories to their own prowess and ability give to them by their "gods," when in reality, their victories over Israel would be handed to them by God Himself. In the face of defeating Israel, the nations would say "Our hand is triumphant, And Adonai has not done all this" (v. 27). Such a perspective is sheer folly: "How could one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and Adonai had given them up?" (v. 30). Here, the weakness of the nations when compared to Israel defended by God is like one to a thousand, and two to ten thousand. If the nations would but think for a moment, they would realize that their victories over Israel were God's doing, not their own. But like Israel, they too are foolish, believing in their own strength.

Thus, in order to establish His glory upon the earth, God will preserve Israel. This makes a very important point: the faithfulness of God to Israel has as its primary purpose the revelation of God's greatness, not Israel's importance. The light that Israel is to shine forth is not reflected back to herself, but toward God. Ezekiel takes up this same theme. Speaking of how God punished Israel for her rebellion by scattering her among the nations, and how as a result, the name of God was profaned, the prophet writes:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Master יהוה, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am יהוה," declares the Master יהוה, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight.'" (Ezek 36:22–23)

Thus, Moses concludes the Song with the bold statement of God establishing justice for His

own Name’s sake. The pagan nations, used by God to punish His wayward children, are corrupt from within. Their vines bear poisonous grapes (v. 32), meaning their corrupt way of life is itself their executioner. God is “storing up” as it were this poison (v. 34), planning to serve it to them in the day of His vengeance (v. 35). In view of this pending judgment upon the nations, Moses turns to note the compassion of God upon His people Israel (v. 36). When they finally realize that the idols in which they have trusted afford them no safety and give them no help, God will ask them: “Where are your gods, the “rock” in which you sought refuge?” (v. 37). Then He will make known to them that He is the One who brought upon them the calamity—He is the One Who wounded them, but He is also the One Who can heal (v. 39). He will make Israel to know that no one can deliver out of His hand, and that He alone is the God of heaven. “...in that day Adonai will be the only one, and His name the only one” (Zech 14:9).

When His wrath is poured out upon the nations, God will yet call to them in an offer of salvation (v. 43): “Rejoice, O nations, with His people; For He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance on His adversaries, and will atone for His land and His people.” Once again, salvation is offered in connection with Israel, even as the nations were apportioned in relationship to Israel. The Song makes it amply clear that God’s salvation is inextricably bound to His covenant with Israel. Those from the nations who would find refuge in God, will do so only as they “rejoice with His people.” The salvation provided by God and anti-Semitism are therefore entirely incongruous. Supersessionism, the doctrine that the Church has replaced Israel, undermines the very foundations of divine salvation itself.

After delivering the Song to the nation of Israel, with Joshua close at his side, Moses exhorts them to heed its warning (vv. 44–47). It is as though Israel has been given an opportunity to peer into the future—to see the consequences of rebellion against God. History has shown that we did not heed the warning, at least on a national scale. Yet the Song is not only given to the nation as a corporate identity, but to each individual who makes up the nation. Thus, history also tells us that in every generation, some did heed the message of the Song, for in every generation there has existed the “faithful remnant” who have clung to God and His commandments (cf. Is 10:22; Rom 9:27; 11:5).

Moses reminds the people of the importance of the Torah in their lives (vv. 46–47). He admonishes us to “take these words to heart” (literally, “Place upon your heart these words” שִׁימוּ לְבַבְכֶם (לְכַל־הַדְּבָרִים)). This expression means to study the Torah, memorize it, meditate upon the meaning of its instructions, and make them the guiding principle that governs all of life. In doing so, we are also to “command our children to keep (לְשַׁמֵּר) and to do (לַעֲשׂוֹת) all the words of this Torah.” Here is the generational aspect. Both through our deeds and our words, we are to impress upon our children the glory and mercies of God Who has given us His divine instructions for life. When we receive them as the gift that they truly are, we experience, even in this fallen world, the greatest joy and blessing. What more could parents want for their children and grandchildren than that they should experience the protective, supplying hand of the Almighty?

But the next words of Moses are insightful (v. 47): “For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life.” The word translated “idle” is רֵיקָה, *reiq*, meaning “empty,” “without substance,” “trivial.” How often in the history of faith has the Torah been considered “of no value,” or even worse, as “dangerous” and therefore to be avoided. The words of HaShem speak just the opposite. Instead of “empty,” the words of Torah are full of life: “indeed, it (the Torah) is your life.” By this Moses does not mean that the words of Torah are the source of life, for surely God is that source. Nor is

Moses contradicting Paul when he writes: “by the works of the Torah no flesh will be justified” (Rom 3:20). For in the case of Moses’ song, he speaks to those who have already been “redeemed” from Egypt, the event that became the paradigm for redemption in a spiritual sense. Rather, Moses is teaching us that as those who are redeemed, the Torah as God’s instructions to us is the manner in which we are to live life, and by doing so, to experience life as God intends it. As the Psalmist writes:

Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of Adonai. Who is the man who desires life and loves length of days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it. (Ps 34:11–13)

Indeed, Torah is our life and the length of our days. For Isaiah, utilizing a word related to *רָק*, writes:

So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty (*רֵיקָם*, *reiqam*), without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Is 55:11)

We must trust God’s word, His Torah or instructions in righteous living, to accomplish His purpose in our lives. Our responsibility is to know His word, place it upon our hearts, meditate upon it, and make it the guiding principle for how we live. This we can accomplish by the power of the Spirit as we submit to His sanctifying process in our lives.

In the end, it is the message of the Song of Moses that is sung in the heavenly court as the history of the world is brought to its divinely ordained goal.

And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For all the nations will come and worship before You, For Your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev 15:2–4).

Once again, it is the manifest glory of God, seen in the victory of His people as they live out His commandments and thus are made triumphant, that causes the nations to come and worship Him. God’s righteous acts are only known and understood by the nations as His chosen people shine forth the light of His greatest through their own lives of obedience and worship. For when we do, the nations will understand the unique and wonderful glory of our God:

So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is Adonai our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole Torah which I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6–8)