God, Our Rock (Deut 32:1–43): Reading the Metaphor in its Pentateuchal Context

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Abstract

The metaphor of God as the Rock, with its nascent imagery of stability, strength, and protection, is a popular refrain in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the book of Psalms, and with some interesting additions in the book of Deuteronomy. The analysis here focuses on the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43), where its associated text and imagery portrays God, who is represented as the Rock, as a source of faithfulness and righteousness, who gives birth to Israel, judges her, and saves her. Such attributes belong to God and not to the metaphorical rock. Using the cognitive approach to metaphors, this article offers an understanding of God our Rock and of the poet's intended reorientation associated with the use of the metaphor. The article finds the origins of the metaphor of the rock, as in Deuteronomy 32, in the Pentateuchal context of the desert *leitmotif* and the events at Horeb/Sinai. This conclusion challenges the view that the metaphor and its associated attributes was borrowed from Canaanite mythology.

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Because we live so close to the biblical text, we often fail to note its generative power to summon and evoke new life.
(Walter Brueggemann 1989)

1. Prelude

Throughout history, there have been sacred rocks, immortalized in song and story, which have inspired human communities. Since the first human beings walked this earth, rocks (caves and rock-shelters) have supplied places of refuge and safety. The metaphor of God as a Rock, with its nascent imagery of stability, strength, and protection, is a popular refrain in the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Psalms, and in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43). Generally, the Rock is associated with further metaphors like fortress, tower, and hiding place and historical moments like David's desert escape to the wilderness or the Exodus from Egypt. Using a form of the cognitive approach to metaphors, this article examines the use of the metaphor, God our Rock, and underlines the poet's intended reorientation implicit in the use of the metaphor. The focus of the article[1] is Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses or the Witness Song (Deut 31:19, 21; McConville 2002, 436), where we encounter several references to the Rock as an epithet for God.

The study of biblical metaphors has attracted considerable attention in recent decades (Weiss 1984; Nielsen 1989; Brettler 1989; Jindo 2010; Foreman 2011; Fernandes 2018; Cho 2019). Most biblical metaphors grow out of the world of nature, whether agricultural (plants, seeds, trees, and harvest) or the wild (animals, birds, streams, and mountains). Such metaphors occur regularly in the context of poetry (Brueggemann 1989; Alter 1985). But it is when metaphors are used of God that the power of the poetic metaphor becomes most striking. Brueggemann (1989) stresses the ability of poetry to engage with the mystery of God in a way which narrative is unable to do, while Brettler (1989) recognizes the consistent use of metaphor in speaking about God.

Brettler (1989) divides divine biblical metaphors into two groups, namely familial (e.g., king, father, husband) and impersonal (e.g., eagle, rock). In the last few decades, the academic study of the impersonal rock metaphor has focused primarily on the book of Psalms (Brettler 1989; 1998; Labahn and Van Hecke 2010; Fernandes 2018). The focus of this article is on Deuteronomy 31, which also represents the only occurrences of the rock metaphor in the Pentateuch. An earlier study by Knowles (1989) on the metaphor in Deuteronomy 31 argues that the metaphor was borrowed from earlier Ancient Near Eastern mythology (1989, 316). In this regard, Knowles (1989, 310, 314–316) follows the earlier view of Albright that the Hebrew term used for the rock was a common name for deity in the Ancient Near East (Albright 1959, 345; 1968, 164, 188). Knowles (1989, 314–316) further believes that Deuteronomy 31, especially verse four, has a polemical intent challenging the common pagan use of the metaphor. This article takes issue with both claims, namely the pagan origin of the metaphor and consequent polemical intent of Deuteronomy 31, pointing instead to a source for the metaphor much closer to home.

The Song of Moses and its images of a rocky crag aligns comfortably with the Exodus traditions. The deserts of southern Sinai (or north-western Arabian Peninsula; Smith 2001) are remembered in the biblical tradition as the place of Israel's primary encounter with the deity Yahweh (Talmon 1978, 436; Albertz 1994, 51; Day 2002; Hess 2007, 172–175; Noll 2013, 135). From

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the outset, mountains and wilderness and the occasional rock play a crucial role in the wilderness narrative. According to the opening chapters of Exodus, Moses encountered the mysterious deity Yahweh, in the form of a theophany, in a desert region close to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God (Exod 3:1). There God revealed himself as Yahweh (Exod 3:14), and connected this name with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 15). The next occasion where Horeb is mentioned is in Exodus chapter seventeen, the account of water coming from a rock. Significantly, in verse six, Yahweh (cf. v. 5) stands upon the rock or *sûr* [צוּר], which is at Horeb. Here is the first connection between God and a specific צוּר which may well be the source of the metaphor, God our Rock. Horeb and Sinai share an ambiguous relationship in the exodus wanderings, with Exodus preferring to speak of Sinai as the name for the mountain where Moses receives the commandments (Exod 19:20) and Deuteronomy (Deut 5:2) choosing Horeb for that event.

2. The Desert *Leitmotif*

The various Horeb/Sinai events are part of the desert-motif or better *leitmotif*[2] , since it functions at the metalevel (see Baldick 2001, 162), and binds much of the Pentateuch together. Talmon, who has written extensively on the desert-motif, defines a motif as "a representative complex theme which recurs in the Hebrew Bible in varying forms and configurations," which come from some "common experience" familiar to the audience (1966, 121). The desert motif occurs in several ancient poetic fragments which describe God's early relationship with Israel. In the Song of Moses (Deut 32:10), the poet[3] writes, "He [God] found him [Israel] in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, he cared for him" (see Goldingay 2003, 454). In Isaiah, we read, "Behold the name of the Lord comes from a remote place; Burning is his anger and dense is his smoke" (Isa 30:27a).[4] Habakkuk (3:3a) reads, "Eloah comes from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran." The two named locations are both in desert regions: Teman is in Edom (Jer 49:20) and Paran is one of two mountains mentioned in the setting of Deuteronomy in the Arabah (Deut 1:1). Smith concludes that the origins of the belief in a desert deity known as Yahweh may be found in the "southern sites of Seir/Teman/Sinai … located by many scholars today in the northwestern Arabian Peninsula east of the Red Sea" (2001, n.p.; cf. Day 2002, 15–17).

3. Holy Mountains

A further important motif, and one closely related to the desert *leitmotif*, is that of sacred mountains (Talmon 1987, 117–123). Holy mountains are to be found across the ancient Near East (Cross 1973, 247–249). For example, the Egyptian text of Nefer-abu, addressed to a mountain peak which towered over the necropolis opposite Thebes, reads "Giving praise to the Peak of the west, honouring her Ka (spirit)" (Votive stele of Nefer-abu line 1; in Beyerlin 1978, 35). In this remarkable instance, the deity and the mountain are perceived to be identical. More commonly, however, the mountain is conceived as the chosen location of a specific deity. An examination of select Ugaritic[5] texts makes this clear. Baal and El were both associated with the

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2 The word *Leitmotif* is used in this paper to describe the overarching desert motif, which forms a backdrop to the book of Deuteronomy following Baldick's definition (2001, 162).
3 I use the term "poet" to refer to the various writers of Hebrew poetry.
4 All Bible quotations in English are taken from the New American Standard Version (1963).
5 The translations for the texts used here are from the edition of Beyerlin (1978).

mountain of the North (Zaphon). For example, we read of "Baal who dwells in the peaks of the mountains of the north" (CTA Col. I, 20); or "In the midst of my mountains, the god of Zaphon" (CTA3 Col. III–IV, 25). In the Ugaritic texts Mount Zaphon referred to Mount Cassius in Syria (Dahood 1966, 289), but the name is also found in the biblical text in relation to Yahweh (Pss 48:2; 89:13; Isa 14:13; Job 26:7). Dahood explains the connection as "Mount Zion is to Yahwism what Mount Zaphon is to Canaanite religion" (1966, 289–290). This connection has caused some scholars to speculate about a direct case of borrowing (see references in Dahood 1966, 290).

When dealing with the study of symbols (semiotics) such as sacred mountains or sacred rocks, the caution expressed by Barr (1961) takes on a special significance. Barr's concern arose as a result of his reading the theological dictionaries of the time and the way in which each occurrence of a Hebrew word was treated as having the identical meaning, often regardless of context. For Barr, this transference of meaning, might in certain circumstances result in "an illegitimate totality transfer" (1961). The warning is even more appropriate for the transfer of symbols. A case in point is the regular appeal, when mountains are mentioned in the biblical text, to the omphalos myth or the idea of the cosmic mountains and mythical primal rocks (Fabry 2003, 317–318; Haag 1999, 276–277; Keel 1997, 181). To interpret a symbol or metaphor out of the context of a specific biblical text is to run the risk of transferring both form and content, precisely what Barr was afraid of. More specifically, Selman (1997, 1052) warns that the commonalities with other religious traditions should be limited to "literary stereotypes" and not extended to "mythological views about mountains." Noll warns that most Ancient Near Eastern traditions contained "a perpetual flux of myths and even gods" (2013, 323). These views simply reaffirm the wisdom of Barr (1961), not least with reference to biblical metaphors.

The biblical text employs geographical epithets like the Mountain of God (Elohim) in Exodus (3:1; 4:27; 18:5; 24:13) and the Mountain of Yahweh in Numbers (10:33). Indeed, Yahweh is known simply as "the One from Sinai" (Judg 5:5–6 and Ps 68:8–9; see Albertz 1994:51–54). Albertz, who is a great champion of the idea that Yahwism originated in a desert context, writes, "The [G]od who appears to Moses in the wild mountainous country of Southern Palestine mobilizes a whole column of conscript labourers to dare to seek their liberation" (1994:52). Even the enemies of Israel are afraid because the God of Israel is a "God of the mountains, and not of the plains" (1 Kings 20:23, 28).

Mountains like Sinai or Horeb or Mount Zion are deemed to be the locations for the divine theophany; however, the relationship between God and these mountains is a complex one. Noll (2013, 342) speaks of the mountain where God "promised to be 'immanent,' just as God was present in the Ark of the Covenant." Talmon (1978, 436) correctly affirms that it is the association with the God of Israel which makes a location holy. Thus, in the book of Exodus, the expression "the mountain of God" is applied in turn to Mount Horeb (Exod 3:1; 4:27; 18:5) and from chapter 19 onwards to Mount Sinai (24:13 cf. 19:1–2, 11), without a clear distinction being made, suggesting that the same mountain or range of mountains is intended (Moberly 1983). Later Jerusalem, itself depicted as a mountain, will become known as the place of God's presence. Psalm 68 explains, "The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness" (v. 17b).

4. Ṣûr, the Hebrew Term

The Hebrew term צוּר or *ṣûr* is found seventy-four times in the Hebrew Bible and twice in the Aramaic sections (Dan 2:35, 45; see Fabry 2003, 314). *Ṣûr* is usually rendered in translation as rock, boulder, cliff face (Hill 1997b, 793; Fabry 2003, 312; BDB 1972, 840). Possible cognates for *ṣûr* within the North West Semitic region include the Ugaritic *ġr* meaning mountain (Dreyer 1971; Fabry 2003, 312), and the Aramaic *tûr* for mountain (Hill 1997b, 793). *Ṣûr* appears also in some Aramaic and Amorite personal names (Fabry 2003, 311). Dreyer (1971), in a comprehensive article, suggested that the Ugaritic root *ġr* formed the basis for an entire semantic domain, which included several Hebrew words, like *har* (mountain), *ʻr* (city), and the noun *ṣûr* I (rock), although this view has been challenged (Thiel 2003, 306–311). In the Hebrew Bible, *ṣûr* appears in some theophoric names (Num 1:6; 2:2; 3:35; see Fabry 2003, 313). When joined to a name, it may be used of particular rocks like the Rock of Oreb, named after a Midian leader (Judg 7:25) and the Rock of Rimmon (Judg 20:45).

The synonym used most often with *ṣûr* is *selaʻ* [סלע]. The noun *selaʻ* is found sixty-three times in the Hebrew Bible (Haag 1999, 270; Hill 1997a, 267), often in poetic parallels with *ṣûr* (e.g., Deut 32:13). Like *ṣûr*, *selaʻ* is also used metaphorically of God our Rock (4x), but in contrast to *ṣûr*, *selaʻ* is regularly translated by the NASV as cliff (8x) or crag (5x) in addition to rock (44x). The semantic domain of rocks, crags and mountains includes various cognate forms, of which the most common are the terms mountains (105x *har* הַר) and hills (*gibʻâh* גִּבְעָה) (Talmon 1978; Selmon 1997, 1051–1055). *Har* is used of individual peaks like Sinai and for mountain ranges (Selman 1997, 1051–1052). On a smaller scale we have the common word for stones, namely *ʼeben* [אֶבֶן] found regularly (Heb. 260x and Aram. 8x; See Hill 1997c, 248–250). The term *ʼeben* is used also of idols (Deut 28:36) and standing stones in temples, like the Israelite temple in Arad (see Aharoni and Amiran 1975, 86–87). In addition, *ʼeben* is used of the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were inscribed (Exod 24:12).

In terms of visualizing the noun *ṣûr*, in the biblical text, various references suggest that while sometimes used of smaller rocks, it is used consistently for large rocks even cliffs and crags. Both mountain (*har*, see Isa 30:29) and hill (*gibʻâh*, see Num 23:9) are found in poetic parallel with *ṣûr*. For example, in a chapter which starts with a lament regarding the destruction of human hope, Job speaks of the power of God to change nature, even the seemingly unchangeable like the mountains. The poet writes, "But the falling mountains [lit. the mountain] crumble away; and the rock (*ṣûr*) moves from its place. Water wears away stones (*ʼeben* in the plural), its torrents wash away the dust of the earth; So Thou dost destroy man's hope" (Job 14:18–19).

In the first part of the stanza, *har* and *ṣûr* are in parallel. This suggests that *ṣûr* is in some way comparable with mountains, and a translation such as crag would be more suitable. In the second part of the stanza, the poetic parallel is between stones [*ʼeben*] and dust (perhaps gravel). One may imagine the crumbling of the mountains, even the rocky crags, the washing away of the river stones, even the gravel of the streambeds. In this way the poet expressed the erosion of human hopes. In general, the literary evidence suggests that *ṣûr* means more than a large rock or boulder and is closer to the image of rocky crag, pinnacle, or spire. This does not mean that the terms should always be rendered as mountain (as Albright 1968, 16–18; Dahood 1966, 105 fn. 3), but rather that, depending on the context, crag or some similar noun might be warranted, just as its synonym *selaʼ* is often so rendered.

5. Ṣûr the Metaphorical Rock

The metaphor of God the Rock (ṣûr) occurs with striking regularity throughout the poetic sections of the Hebrew Bible, most often in the Psalms (28x), and there are a few other scattered references, like in Isaiah (4x). Knowles writes,

> Thus, at least in statistical terms, the occurrence of ṣûr in the Hebrew scriptures as a metaphor or title descriptive of God equals, if not slightly outnumbers, instances in which the word is applied more prosaically to details of landscape or geography. (Knowles 1989, 307)

Most biblical scholars assume the classical definition such as that found in Baldick who defines metaphor as an important literary form.

> In which one thing, idea, or action is referred to by a word or expression normally denoting another thing, idea, or action, so as to suggest some common quality shared by the two. (Baldick 2001, 153)

By this definition, metaphor is first and foremost a literary device. By joining tenor (God) and vehicle (the Rock), the writer implies a sharing of content between the two, such as elements of stability, while yet retaining their separate identities. Keel (1997, 181), in his extensive study of the symbolism of the biblical world, suggests that in the use of natural metaphors like the Rock, the "Psalmist has in mind particular features of the Palestinian mountain country" and in the case of the Rock of my heart (Pss 73:26) to which the Psalmist holds, "the attribute is illustrated by the unyielding, indestructible firmness of rock" (1997, 183).

Taking the comparison to another level of metaphor, Jindo writes,

> The relationship between the two things (A and B) is that they belong to *different* frames or conceptual domains ("man" belongs to the domain of THE HUMAN WORLD whereas "wolf" to the domain of THE ANIMAL WORLD). (Jindo 2010, xiv-xv; caps in original)

In this case, the rock belongs to the conceptual domain of natural phenomena (the created world in biblical understanding), while God belongs to the domain of the divine. So, there is a shared sense of similarity which nevertheless cannot obscure the vast difference in domain. The metaphor might derive its intrinsic meaning from either side of the metaphorical comparison. This becomes apparent from a study of the Rock in the book of Psalms.

Alter (2004, 1089 fn. 41) writes, "This epithet for God, with the obvious sense of bastion or stronghold, is common in the Psalms." Wright (2012 on Deut 32:4) refers to "its obvious metaphorical force (stable, dependent, unmovable, safe)." When we think of God the Rock, as pictured in the Psalms, the focus might be on an innate sense of the strength of a great crag or peak. Studies of the rock metaphor in Psalms have occupied a central place in scholarly circles (Brettler 1989; 1998; Cho 2019; Fernandes 2012; Van Hecke and Labahn 2010). Such attention is quite justified as the following examples show: Psalm 31:3 reads, "For Thou art my rock and my fortress" which occurs in the introductory verses of a psalm of supplication (cf. Pss 71:3). Psalm 94:22 reads, "But the Lord has been my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge."

Wright (2012 on Deut 32:4) deems the metaphor of the rock to be "appropriate in times of historical danger and change." Images like fortress, stronghold, and refuge are natural associations for places of safety (Block 2012, 611). For example, "O come let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the rock of my salvation" (Pss 95:1). Here "the Lord" and the "rock of my salvation"

are in parallel. Psalm 95 goes on to extoll the greatness of God, and to remind the people of their failings at Meribah and Massah in the wilderness (v. 8). Psalm 18:2[3] proclaims, "The Lord is my rock (*sela'*) and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock [*ṣûr*] in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn [peak] of my salvation, my stronghold." This Psalm also appears as David's psalm sung in celebration of his deliverance from the hand of Saul (2 Sam 22:3). In Psalm 19:14, at the conclusion of the psalm, the writer acknowledges that God is "my rock and my redeemer."

Albright (1959, 1968) first speculated about the pagan origins of the Hebrew term *ṣûr* which he rendered as mountain and connected to the deity El and the Canaanite mythology of sacred mountains (1959, 345; 1968, 164). The idea of *ṣûr* as a generic term for deity surfaces in the study by Knowles (1989, 316) who writes, "it would appear that a certain amount of 'borrowing' is going on here," although he concedes that "some modification" has taken place. Albright speaks in terms of synonym (1959, 345; 1968, 164), while Knowles extends his understanding of Canaanite influence to include the actual rock metaphor (1989). Is this a necessary conclusion? Guarding against what Barr (1961) has termed "the illegitimate transfer of content," this article suggests that the characteristics of the rock metaphor are simply too general (strength, stability, safety, and shelter) to be positively identified with some unspecified Canaanite mythology of sacred mountains. For this reason, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the realm of metaphor.

6. Redefining a Metaphor (the Cognitive Approach)

The theoretical understanding of the cognitive approach to metaphors arises from the thinking of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), who first propounded the idea that metaphors are not simply literary devices but powerful images which impinge on our daily lives, and are embodied in our worldview, hence the title of their book, Metaphors we live by. The cognitive approach has been successfully applied to the Hebrew Bible by Kotze (2004) and more recently by Jindo, who writes,

> The aim of this approach is to offer a possibility of treating the phenomenon of poetic metaphor in biblical prophecy not only as a stylistic component, but also as a cognitive device, through which the text orients, or reorients, the perception of the reader. (Jindo 2010, ix)

Beyond the simple metaphorical aim of comparison, the metaphor aims to bring about a change in perception, as one's reality is transformed through the comprehension of the meaning of the metaphor. The metaphor has a dynamic which brings about a change in the thinking and reality of the reader. For the reader sharing an experience of God the rock, finds that their own faith is challenged and that in this metaphorical picture there is a pattern to be emulated.

> Metaphor has a cognitive value, and it thereby orients our perception of the object it describes. It presents not only a proposition but also a specific perspective, or orientation, through which to perceive that proposition. (Jindo 2010, 44–45)

The rock metaphor, understood in the sense of "a metaphor we live by" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), and in terms of the cognitive approach, takes us from literary device into the life of faith. So, in the context of the wilderness, a notable, especially water-bearing rock takes on a natural meaning of security and shelter and so the rock metaphor would make sense. However, correctly understood, God our Rock goes beyond the simple idea that God and the rock share a common quality— what Jindo terms, "the proposition." The poet intends that by identifying with the metaphor, a

change will occur in the mind and imagination of the reader—what Jindo (2010, 44–45) terms an orientation or reorientation. The readers will desire to enter more deeply into the poetic world and to know for themselves the safety and security of this rock. In the words of Jindo (2010, 45), they will come to "perceive relations and distinctions" they had not previously seen.

7. The Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43)

In contrast to Knowles (1989) who saw the rock metaphor as borrowed from some Canaanite source, this article reasons that the Song of Moses, including its metaphors, should be read in the context and light of the Exodus. To establish the source of the metaphor of the rock, one needs to go no further than the environs of the Exodus wanderings and the desert motif found in the narratives of the Pentateuch. This conclusion is immediately clear from the following semantic study.

In the song (Deut 32), the term rock [ṣûr] is found eight times (vv. 4, 13, 15, 18, 30, 31 [twice], and 37). As an epithet for God, it is found six times (vv. 4, 15, 18, 30, 31, and 37). As a reference to some other unnamed deity, it is found twice (vv. 31, 37), although verse 37 might be an ironical reference to Yahweh. Once ṣûr refers apparently to the natural rock (v. 13). There is only one other occurrence of ṣûr in Deuteronomy and that is in reference to the water-bearing rock (Deut 8:15; cf. Exod 17:6). In dealing with the six uses as an epithet for God, there is a remarkable diversity in the names used for God (El, Eloah, and Yahweh). Throughout the chapter, the Rock functions as both an epithet and as a metaphor, meaning that the line between the attributes of God and the metaphorical elements of the rock may become confused.

7.1. El the Faithful (Deut 32:4)

In verse four, God [El] is linked to a set of striking values. McConville (2002, 448) suggests that we should understand the first word in the sentence as a casus pendens, and so standing alone, "The Rock!" (see NASV), rather than making Rock the subject of the sentence and inserting a clause using the verb to be, "He is the Rock …" (see NIV). The text then reads, "The Rock! His work is perfect, for all his ways are just. A God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is he" (Deut 32:4). However, if one reads the text in this way, one should guard against the notion that the metaphorical imagery of the rock includes attributes like faithfulness, which so clearly belong to God alone. Such is the purpose of reading verse four, as an "antiphonal response" to the cry, "Ascribe greatness to our God" (in v. 3; see Knowles 1989, 310 fn. 7).

While accepting that the Rock serves as a figurative synonym for God, as first recognized by Albright (1968, 188), there is also the wider metaphorical element to be found, namely a sense of strength, stability, and dependence, which is drawn from the domain of rocks and crags and which gives added substance to the metaphor of God the Rock. The pattern of part-epithet and part-metaphor, means that often the reader is obliged to supply the metaphorical elements, as is illustrated by the following three quotations, where I have included the relevant parts in italics. Merrill (1994) speaks of the generic meaning of the rock as a "*foundation and fortress*," but adds, "As the Rock, God is utterly *dependable*, empty of any wrong-doing, the very *foundation* of all integrity and justice." Similarly, Wright concludes that Yahweh as the Rock is "The very *foundation* of all integrity and justice" (2012 on 32:4). Nelson (2002, 370) calls verse four "the theological axiom which governs the poem," and then speaks of the Rock as providing "the *bedrock* of justice and righteousness for what is to follow" (2002, 370). Terms like foundation (Merrill 1994; Wright 2012)

and bedrock (Nelson 2002, 370) are not found in verse four and so are simply conjectural, which suggests that one needs to draw a line between those qualities implicit in the metaphor of the rock and those qualities which belong exclusively to God, like justice and faithfulness

At a metalevel when one reads the verse contextually, there is the sense of the desert-leitmotif of the wilderness wanderings and specifically God's presence at Mount Horeb and the covenant made there and reaffirmed at the edge of the promised land. Wright (2012), commenting on Deuteronomy 32:4, affirms, "And what makes God distinctive is not merely God's power as the refuge and deliverer of God's people, but God's moral character and absolute justice—precisely the Sinai attributes affirmed in this verse." Wright's mention of "Sinai attributes" is important because it alerts us to the forensic elements which, as has become clear, informs the reading of the Song, and of its metaphors (cf. Deut 32:37). There is an invitation into the world of the poet as expected in a cognitive reading of the metaphor, but often missed in discussions of the Rock as metaphor. The rhetorical intent of the poet seeks to influence and even alter the mindset of the reader by persuading them to experience the faith in the Rock which empowers the Song.

7.2. *Eloah, Maker, and Savior (Deut 32:15)*

In verse fifteen, God (Eloah) is seen as both a creator (maker) and savior. The text reads, "Then he [Jeshurun] forsook God, who made [עָשָׂה] him and scorned the Rock of his salvation [יְשׁוּעָה]" (Deut 32:15). The two parallel verbs connected with Eloah relate to the covenantal relationship between Israel and God and emphasize Israel's indebtedness to her overlord (following the *rîb* pattern; see Thiessen 2004). Israel has been made by God who is also Israel's savior; such metaphorical themes connected to the Rock are to be found elsewhere in Deuteronomy (Deut 20:4) and in extratextual instances in the Hebrew Bible in connection (Isa 51:1; 2 Sam 22:47).

The unusual term used here for Israel, Jeshurun, is found twice in the Blessings of Moses (Deut 33:5,) where it refers to a location, in 33:26 as a name for Israel, and once in Isaiah (Isa 44:2).[6] The name Eloah or *'ĕlôah* [אֱלוֹהַ] is found only here in this chapter in Deuteronomy (Deut 32:15 and 17), and is uncommon in the Hebrew Bible, outside of Wisdom sections like Job (41x) and the Psalms (4x). Perhaps it is an archaic reference for Yahweh (see Day 2002, 18), and there is certainly a strong case to connect it to the desert wanderings (Hab 3:3). The theme of God creating Israel goes back to the meta-narrative of God's quixotic relationship with Israel (cf. vv. 6–14) and prepares the reader for verse eighteen. The desert *leitmotif* is already present in verse ten, which reads, "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye."

7.3 *El our Mother (Deut 32:18)*

The name El returns in verse eighteen, a verse which in many ways is rather remarkable. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is associated with the idea of making human beings (Gen 1:27), calling them from the womb (Jer 1:5), but there is always a human medium (mother and father) involved. Here in Deuteronomy, the poet strikes a different note, by linking the metaphor of birth directly with God (McConville 2002, 456). There is no human agent involved as an intermediary. In addition, the poet raises the sense of the ingratitude of Israel (McConville 2002, 456).

The metaphorical imagery of protective care and parental discipline as a father is found earlier in the book (Deut 1:31 and 8:5). The poet writes, "Is not he [El] your Father who has made

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6 Isaiah 44 also has the only reference in Isaiah to God the Rock (v. 8).

you? He has made you and established you" (Deut 32:6). Such imagery is not unusual in the Pentateuch (see Num 11:12; Exod 4:22), but here uniquely God is represented as a mother. In addition, there is the double metaphor as the metaphor of birth is joined to the metaphor of the Rock. Two verbs are used in parallel describing God (El) giving birth. The poet writes (32:18) "You have neglected the God (El) who begot you [ילד]; and you forgot the God (El) who gave you birth [חיל]." The first verb *yâlad*, rendered often in translations of this verse as "begat," is common in genealogies to connect a child directly with his or her father (Gen 4:18; 10:8; 1 Chr 1:10; Owens 2011, 100). Outside of genealogies, *yâlad* is only rarely used of a father (Prov 17:21; 23:22; Dan 11:6). In the predominance of instances, a mother is the intended subject (McConville 2002, 456). The second verb *ḥiʾel* [חיל] carries a literal meaning of dancing or writhing (as in birthing pains), and is clearly intended to represent a mother giving birth, and so is correctly rendered as "gave birth." Most likely, both parts of the verse embody the metaphor of a mother giving birth. For these reasons, Fabry's translation is admirable: "You were unmindful of the Rock (*ṣûr*) that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth" (2003, 319; see Wright 2012 on Deut 32:18).

The feminine imagery is not restricted to this verse. Earlier, in verse 13, the verb *yânaq* is used to refer to Israel suckling from the rock [*selaʿ* and *ṣûr* in parallel] for honey and oil (see Domeris 1997, 473). The honey and oil represent the bounty of the promised land, on which Israel feasts. Knowles (1989, 318), in reference to the verb *yânaq*, remarks that "nowhere else is God the subject" of this verb . Truly a singular metaphor is at work here.

7.4. Yahweh the Judge (Deut 32:30)

In the context of the *rîb* pattern (see Thiessen 2004), it is not surprising to encounter the judgment of God on Israel. Verse thirty parallels God (Yahweh the Rock) selling Israel (cf. v. 28) and shutting them up (literally, giving them up). The text reads in part, "Unless their Rock had sold them, and the Lord (Yahweh) had given them up." Here is another of the rare connections between the name Yahweh and the metaphor of the Rock, and the only instance in Deuteronomy. The theme of being sold, presumably into some form of bondage, reminds us of an earlier passage in Deuteronomy, where the people of Israel are sent back to Egypt as slaves, but ironically there are no buyers (Deut 28:68; Domeris 2018, 51). Now the theme of being sold returns and this makes sense in the context of the judgement underlying the Song of Moses, so grounding God's action vis-à-vis Israel within the covenantal framework that frames the Song (the meta-narrative of Horeb). Watts (1995) concludes, "As in the past, so in the future, Israel holds the key to its own fortunes in its observance of the law." One hears the rhetorical appeal inviting the reader to enter into the world of the faith espoused by the poet and in so doing to make a choice for life (Deut 30:19) and to disassociate from the "other" implicit in the Song.

7.5. Their Rock is not like our Rock (Deut 32:31)

The text reads, "Indeed their rock is not like our Rock" (Deut 32:31a), which introduces a contrasting element into the equation. Such an intent is manifest in *rîb* pattern and underlines the failure of Israel to follow Yahweh and to be obedient to his covenant (Knowles 1989, 311–313; Merrill 1994). Here is clear evidence of what Stulman (1995) called insider/outsider language and which is a regular feature of the prophetic literature. One mark of such language is the juxtaposition of two worlds, side by side, and the appeal to belong to one of these domains and to distance oneself from the other. Often such language is accompanied by irony, which naturally divides the audience (Caird 1997, 104–105) and is a regular feature of this chapter (Knowles 1989, 313).

The poet reaches a climactic moment here in this verse, namely the presentation of a choice between two worldviews, represented metaphorically as "our Rock" and "their rock." It matters very little whether "their rock" envisages the encroachment of other religions (cf. Deut 7:5, 30; 12:2, 30; 28:36; 29:18, 26; see Knowles 1989, 314–316) or some form of Israelite syncretism such as emerged in the time of the monarchy (cf. Hess 2007, 297–335; Day 2002; Smith 2001). The intended contrasting faiths remain the same. "Their rock" may even be an ironic thrust against the standing stones [*'eben*] like those found in the Israelite sanctuary at Arad, later destroyed by Hezekiah (Aharoni and Amiran, 1975, 86). From the poet's perspective, Yahweh stands alone (Knowles 1989, 320), in what Goldingay (2006, 36–40) describes as "mono-Yahwism."

8. The Incomparability of Yahweh

In a remarkable book by Labuschagne (1966), entitled *The Incomparability of Yahweh*, the theme of God's uniqueness, beginning with images like the Rock is spelt out across the texts of the Hebrew Bible. One such example is the passage under review in this article. Vividly the poet, in declarative assertions throughout the Song (Deut 32:4–43) and in diverse ways incorporating both metaphors and motifs, has presented an unforgettable picture of the symbolic world of God, our Rock. The Song functions as a witness to call on Israel to hold to a sense of the incomparability of Yahweh and to forsake all other rocks. It is the rhetorical intention of the Song, best understood from the perspective of the cognitive approach to the metaphors, which gives an urgent note to that call. Here a reminder of what Jindo refers to as that "cognitive device, through which the text orients, or reorients, the perception of the reader" (2010, ix) is appropriate.

This Rock, given context by the desert leitmotif was probably a typical sandstone crag, of the desert regions like Edom or Sinai/Horeb—stark and lonely. McConville confirms that "Rock is a natural metaphor in a hot and dangerous land, offering both shade and hiding" (2002, 453). While concurring with this assessment, one needs to take this connection a stage further. In the context of the exodus narratives as found in the Pentateuch, and specifically in the Horeb/Sinai traditions, the rock is an appropriate symbol for Yahweh who first manifested his awesome power in the desert.

Metaphorically, the term may conjure up a craggy monolith wreathed in wisps of cloud, a place of mystery and awe, a refuge where one might find shelter from a storm, or stand aloft and gaze down at one's enemies, as David did in the region of Ein-Gedi. Guarding against what Barr (1961) has termed "the illegitimate transfer of content," this article argues instead for an Israelite source. The characteristics of Rock are simply too general (safety and shelter) to be positively identified with the wider Canaanite world of sacred mountains as argued by Albright (1959, 1968), Dahood (1966), Cross (1973), and most recently Knowles (1989), but belong instead to the Pentateuchal motif of the desert wanderings.

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