



Moshe the Deuteronomist

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As we head into the Book of Deuteronomy, we will quickly notice that something has changed. The style of narration is different than we have seen in the Torah so far. The opening words, from which the book's Hebrew name (Devarim), is taken, clue us into the shift:

דברים א:

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deuteronomy 1:1

These are the words (*devarim*) that Moshe spoke to all of Israel.

This book will consist mostly of Moshe's own words. The first five verses set the stage for Moshe's great final oratory. What follows for the next 33 chapters is Moshe retelling the story of the journey so far, Moshe rebuking the people, Moshe adding new laws, Moshe reciting poetry, and Moshe giving blessings.

All of this is delivered in first person: "I said to you"; "you answered **me**"; "I approved the plan"; "I sent messengers"; "I pleaded with God"; "I call Heaven and Earth to witness against



you today.”¹ Gone is the passive voice of the narrator, humbly transcribing God’s message, speaking of himself in the third person, like just another character in a larger story.

Deuteronomy is Moshe’s story to tell.

This is more than just a stylistic change. The narrative framing of Moshe’s voice in the final book of the Torah directs us to a methodological approach to the literary study of Deuteronomy. Whatever we read in this book must be considered in the light of Moshe’s perspective. So when—here in this first chapter—Moshe’s account of the appointment of judges (Deuteronomy 1:12-18) or the dispatch of scouts (1:22-36) differs in significant ways from the version of those stories we have already read in Exodus and Numbers, we must ask whether Moshe is deliberately changing the story, or if he remembers it differently. When the laws in Deuteronomy seem to critique behavior we have seen before—such as the commandment not to erect a monument (*matzeivah*, Deuteronomy 16:22), which Ya’akov did so often²—we cannot help but wonder if it is Moshe himself offering the critique (perhaps informed by his own experience of the perils of idolatry during the desert journey). And as Moshe constantly rails against the people and their rebellion, and tells them how angry God has been with them, it is fair to ask whether it is really God who is angry, or Moshe himself. The question of Moshe’s agenda always hovers above our reading of Deuteronomy.

But this approach presents Jewish tradition with some theological challenges. For a *baraita* in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 99a) says:

¹ Deuteronomy 1:9; 1:14; 1:23; 2:26; 3:23; 30:19.

² See Genesis 28:18; 31:45; 35:14; 35:20. Rashi (on Deuteronomy 16:22) attempts to deal with this problem by saying that *matzeivot* were beloved in the days of the Patriarchs, but became hated because they had since become a religious practice of the Canaanites.



תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין צט.

"כי דבר ה' בזה" (במדבר טו:לא): זה האומר אין תורה מן השמים. ואפילו אמר כל התורה כולה מן השמים, חוץ מפסוק זה שלא אמרו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא משה מפי עצמו, זהו כי דבר ה' בזה.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 99a

"For he has disgraced the word of the Eternal" (Numbers 15:31). This refers to one who says that the Torah is not from Heaven. Even if he says that the whole Torah is from Heaven, except for one particular verse, which was not uttered by the Holy Blessed One, but came from Moshe's own mouth, he is included in "for he has disgraced the word of the Eternal."

This notion that every verse of the Torah is God's unfiltered word becomes a central tenet of Judaism, especially when it is restated by Maimonides as one of his 13 principles of faith. To suggest that nearly all of Deuteronomy is a little less divine would, in that formulation, be a great heresy.³

Yet even in the Talmud itself, we can find support for the understanding that Deuteronomy is more Moshe's own voice than the other books of the Torah. The 4th century Amora, Abbaye, said:

תלמוד בבלי מגילה לא:

לא שנו אלא בקללות שבתורת כהנים, אבל קללות שבמשנה תורה – פוסק. מאי טעמא? – הללו בלשון רבים אמורות, ומשה מפי הגבורה אמרן, והללו בלשון יחיד אמורות, ומשה מפי עצמו אמרן.

³ Sifrei Devarim brings up this point several times. See, e.g., *piska* 5: "The Eternal Our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: Moshe said to them, 'I am not saying this on my own. Rather, the things I say come from the mouth of God.'"



Talmud Bavli Megillah 31b

The rule [about having no break between verses when reading the Torah] was laid down only for the curses in Leviticus, but for the curses in Deuteronomy a break may be made. What is the reason? In the former Israel are addressed in the plural and Moshe spoke them exactly as they came from the mouth Almighty; in the latter Israel are addressed in the singular, and Moshe spoke these from his own mouth.

This position seems to directly contradict the one above, using the very same language (Moshe spoke these from his own mouth) that the *baraita* called a disgrace. Yet, later Jewish thinkers continued to make this distinction between Deuteronomy and the rest of the Torah. 18th century Moroccan R. Hayyim Ibn Attar (the Ohr HaHayyim HaKadosh), for example, writes:

אור החיים דברים א:א

"אלה הדברים" פי' אלה לבד הם הדברים אשר דבר משה דברי עצמו. אבל כל הקודם בד' חומשים לא אמר אפילו אות אחת מעצמו אלא הדברים שיצאו מפי המצוה כצורתן בלא שום שינוי אפילו אות אחת יתירה או חסרה.

Or HaHayyim on Deuteronomy 1:1

"These are the words..."—that is, these alone are the words "that Moshe spoke" as his own words. But everything before this, in the first four books of the Torah, he did not utter even one letter of his own.

So which is it? Is Deuteronomy equal in stature to the other four books of the Torah, or is it somehow more human? Are these words (*eileh hadevarim*) God's words, or Moshe's?



One solution to the problem emerges from a remarkable piece of *midrash* in Devarim Rabbah,⁴ which refers back to a scene in Exodus, when God first calls on Moshe to go back to Pharaoh and lead the people. Moshe tries to get out of it, and says:

שמות ד':

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִכִּי גַם מִתְמָוִל גַּם מִשְׁלֶשֶׁם גַּם מֵאֵז דְּבָרְךָ אֶל עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כָבֵד פֶּה וְכָבֵד לָשׁוֹן אֲנִכִּי.

Exodus 4:10

Please, O Lord, I am not a man of **words**. Never before and not now that You have spoken to your servant. For I am slow of speech and I have a heavy tongue.

Moshe was, by his own description, **not** a man of words. Most commentators understand this to mean he had a speech impediment.⁵ The *midrash* thus picks up on the irony of an entire book made up of his words.

דברים רבה א:א

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא ראה לשונה של תורה מה חביבה שמרפא את הלשון...
משה עד שלא זכה לתורה כתיב בו (שמות ד', י'): לא איש דברים אנכי, כיון שזכה לתורה נתרפא לשונו והתחיל לדבר דברים, מנין, ממה שקרינו בענין, אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה.

Devarim Rabbah 1:1

The Holy Blessed One said, look at how precious the language of the Torah is, for it heals the tongue...

⁴ See also a similar version in the Tanhuma Devarim 2.

⁵ See Rashi, who says Moshe spoke with a stammer, or Ibn Ezra, who says that Moshe could not pronounce certain letters.

Moshe, before he received the Torah, said, “I am not a man of **words**.” But when he received the Torah, his tongue was healed and he began to speak words. Where do we see this? From what we read in this passage: “And these are **the words** that Moshe spoke.”

Moshe has become a man of words. The Torah has healed him. This has a physical manifestation in the imagery of our *midrash*: his tongue begins to work. But it means more than that. Because after all, he has been speaking all along. It’s not as if he literally couldn’t talk.

He has become a man of words because he now knows how to speak the language of Torah; he knows what to say, how to communicate ideas. By serving as the mouthpiece of God, and speaking out the words of the Torah for four straight books, Moshe has learned what it means to speak with power and conviction. The Torah has been inside of him, and it has changed him.

That’s why the *midrash* connects the “words” in Exodus with the “words” in Deuteronomy. The words here are the kind of words he learned there. When he was nervous then, God’s response was:

שמות ד:יב

וַעֲתָה לֵךְ וְאֶנְכִּי אֶהְיֶה עִם פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר.

Exodus 4:12

Now go, and I will be with your mouth, and I will show you how to speak.

He learned to speak from God. He learned to speak **like** God. And now his own words are considered the word of God.



That's how we can say that Deuteronomy was made up of Moshe's own words and still call it a part of the Heavenly Torah: by now there is no difference. Moshe is a living, breathing embodiment of Torah. Perhaps this is what God meant by, "I will show you how to speak" (*horeitikha*), for that language is related to the word, *torah*. It is as if God has said, "I will turn you into Torah."⁶

If speaking words of Torah could transform Moshe himself into Torah, then perhaps that can happen to us as well. As we read and study and chant the words of Torah, let us allow ourselves to be transformed by them. Then when we write down our own words of commentary, they too, will be considered Torah—for we have become part of the Torah ourselves.

⁶ Thanks to my colleague R. Jason Rogoff for pointing this out.

