Prof. Tamar Kamionkowski

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Dr. Tamar Kamionkowski is professor of biblical studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). She received her Ph.D. from Brandeis University. Tamar is the author *of Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* and co-editor of *Bodies, Embodiment and Theological of the Hebrew Scriptures*.

A Theological Revolution in Deuteronomy

Unlike the Priestly writers for whom sacrifice and rituals are needed to maintain the divine presence in the Tabernacle, the Deuteronomists stress God's transcendence and the obedience of the heart and soul.

[Prof. Tamar Kamionkowski](https://www.thetorah.com/author/tamar-kamionkowski)



Jerusalem skyline. A. Luccaroni/Pixabay adapted

The first eleven chapters of Deuteronomy serve as an extended prologue to its laws. In these introductory sermons, Moses addresses the community on the plains of Moab to reflect on the forty years in the wilderness and to reiterate key points regarding God’s expectations of Israel.

Loving and Fearing God: New Ideas

In Deuteronomy 12, Moses tells the community about what God expects from the people as they enter into the Promised Land.

דברים יב:יב וְעַתָּה֙ יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל מָ֚ה יְ־הֹוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ שֹׁאֵ֖ל מֵעִמָּ֑ךְ כִּ֣י אִם לְ֠יִרְאָה אֶת יְ־הֹוָ֨ה אֱלֹהֶ֜יךָ לָלֶ֤כֶת בְּכָל דְּרָכָיו֙ וּלְאַהֲבָ֣ה אֹת֔וֹ וְלַֽעֲבֹד֙ אֶת יְ־הֹוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ֖ וּבְכָל נַפְשֶֽׁךָ: יב:יג לִשְׁמֹ֞ר אֶת מִצְוֹ֤ת יְ־הֹוָה֙ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתָ֔יו אֲשֶׁ֛ר אָנֹכִ֥י מְצַוְּךָ֖ הַיּ֑וֹם לְט֖וֹב לָֽךְ:

Deut 12:12 “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Simply to fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to love him and to serve the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul, 12:13 to observe the Lord’s commandments and statutes, which I charge you today, for your good” (author’s translation).

On the face of it, there is nothing radical about what Moses is describing; Jewish liturgical and philosophical texts incorporate the commandments to fear and love God and to observe the commandments with a full heart and soul. However, what has become central to Jewish thought and practice was revolutionary when presented in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Unique Deuteronomic Thinking about God

The phrase, “to love the Lord your God,” appears eight times in the Book of Deuteronomy, two times in Joshua and nowhere else in the Bible![1] The demand that Israel fear God never appears in Torah before Deuteronomy, where the phrase occurs nine times.[2] Following the Five Books of Moses, this demand appears only a handful of times.

The phrase, “to walk in his ways,” is a Deuteronomic concept that is repeated only a few times in the Bible by proponents of Deuteronomic thinking. Finally, the mandate that one is to serve God with all of one’s heart and all of one’s soul is unique to the Book of Deuteronomy. In short, what God demands here is unique to this particular book of the Torah.

From the perspective of Biblical criticism, this data begs a number of related questions: What did the authors of Deuteronomy[3] intend by adding these teachings regarding the relationship between Israel and God to the tradition? How was their theology distinctive from the other books of Torah? More fundamentally, what did these phrases mean to the writers?

The Josianic Reform

In order to answer these questions, we begin with Deuteronomy’s place in biblical history. 2 Kings 22-23 describe a series of radical reforms that King Josiah enacted during the latter part of the seventh century BCE. These reforms included the abolishment of all places of worship to foreign gods in the lands that Josiah controlled, the destruction of high places and altar sites to YHWH that were outside of Jerusalem, and, as a consequence, the demotion of the levitical priests.

2 Kings 22 tells us that Josiah executed these reforms as a result of the discovery of a scroll in the Temple, which indicated that sacrifices should be offered at only one central place. Most biblical scholars believe that this “discovered” scroll was an early form of what we now know as the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, because this book by and large advocates the same program that Josiah enacted.

There is no consensus regarding who wrote Deuteronomy, but there is general agreement that the program it advocates includes centralization of all worship in Jerusalem, support for the monarchy but with limited powers, a focus on Torah as the locus for the relationship between God and Israel, and a concept of a more transcendent God than is described elsewhere in Torah.[4]

The authors of Deuteronomy placed their theological, social and political ideologies in the mouth of Moses to give legitimacy to their reforms. In this way, they were able to interact with the tradition as it stood in their time, to reinterpret earlier traditions, and to innovate while grounding the new in the old.

How to Serve God Best: The Deuteronomic versus the Priestly School

The vision of the Deuteronomists contrasts sharply with that of the Priestly writers, who believed that God demanded the ongoing enactment of a complex series of rituals to ensure that the divine presence, God’s *kavod*, would remain within the Tabernacle, which represented the later Temple. The Deuteronomists rejected the idea that God could physically reside in a Temple because they believed that God was wholly transcendent.

In Moses’ retelling of the Sinai event (called Horeb in Deuteronomy), God never descends onto the mountain to meet Moses. The people hear the words of God, but they do not see any aspect of God. God remains in the heavens at all times.[5] Deuteronomy also repurposes the ark from the footstool of God in the Priestly materials to the mundane chest that houses the tablets that contain the words of the Decalogue.[6] A transcendent God does not need a footstool in a Temple.

Deuteronomy does not reject the need for a Temple, but redefines its purpose: it becomes a place for God’s Name to be honored, not a dwelling place for God.[7] As the Deuteronomists decrease the role of the sacrifice cult, they move the site of worship to devotion of God and the study of Torah. The theology of Deuteronomy demands of each individual an absolute obedience of heart and soul to God as articulated through text and teaching. God may be transcendent, but not remote; God may be distant, but God demands passion and a single-minded devotion.

The Deuteronomic Movement

Stephen Geller has described the project of Deuteronomy with great eloquence:

The Deuteronomic Movement centered on the single theme (we shall forbear labeling it an ‘idea’) of unity itself: the one God, whose name rests on the unique shrine, has chosen one people to be His covenant partner. They are bidden to serve Him with total singleness of purpose: with one mind, life, and vigor. Deuteronomic religion is the classic formulation of biblical monotheism, which is actually a trinity of unities: one god, one shrine, one mind. The *belief* in a single deity corresponds to the *action* of limiting His worship to a single shrine, the Jerusalem temple, and to an internal *attitude* that unites total obedience with complete willingness in an emotional compound that Deuteronomy terms love.[8]

It should therefore come as no surprise that the most important Jewish prayer, the *Shema*, comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, and that the second paragraph of that prayer is taken from Deuteronomy 11.

דברים יא:יג וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמֹעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל מִצְו‍ֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעָבְדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם. יא:יד וְנָתַתִּי מְטַר...

Deut 11:13 If you obey the commandments that I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all of your heart and soul, 11:14 then I will give you rain…

We can thank Deuteronomy for teaching us the importance of *yirat Adonai* (fear of God) and *ahavat Adonai* (love of God), two concepts which often merge. It is this voice in Torah that compels us to bring our whole beings into relationship with God as we walk in God’s ways.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/a-theological-revolution-in-deuteronomy)

1. Deut. 10:12, 10:15, 11:13, 11:22, 19:9, 30:6, 30:16, 30:20; Josh 22:5, 23:11.  Isa. 56:6 discusses loving YHWH’s Name.
2. Deut. 4:10, 5:29, 6:24, 8:6, 10:12, 14:23, 17:19, 28:58, 31:13
3. Biblical studies refers to the authors of Deuteronomy as the Deuteronomists.  Some argue that court scribes were behind this movement, others identify the Jerusalem upper class as the primary supporters of this school of thought.  We have yet to come to any consensus on authorship.  Also, the book undoubtedly underwent some level of redaction over the course of centuries and different scholars use the words Deuteronomic and Deueronomistic in different ways..
4. We owe the greatest debt to the work of Moshe Weinfeld (see especially *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic Schoo*l [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972]) for setting the framework of Deuteronomic studies to this day.
5. Deut. 4:9-12
6. Deut. 10:1
7. This is referred to as name (*shem*) theology.  In more recent years, the common understanding of name theology has been critiqued (cf. Sandra Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Place of the Name* [Ph.D. diss, Harvard University Press, 2001]).
8. Stephen Geller, “Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4,” *Prooftexts* 14 (1994) 103-139 (p.105).