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# Dawkins and Deuteronomy: The Evolutionary Sociobiology of Ancient Judaism

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## ABSTRACT

*This article applies Dawkinsian evolutionary psychology to the Mosaic Law as written in the Book of Deuteronomy. Principally drawing on the work of sociobiologist Pierre L. van den Berghe, I argue that the imperatives expressed in Deuteronomical Law are a codification of strategies oriented around intraethnic fitness and social cohesion. Six main themes are embedded in the work that are here put in their sociobiological context. These are: (1) territoriality, (2) intraspecific competition, (3) endogamous fertility, (4) nepotism, (5) linguistic inculcation, and (6) metaphysical heterophobia. Rather than understanding the ethical constructs of Deuteronomy through a theological or literary perspective, I frame them as particular expressions of a deeper sociobiological and evolutionary logic. This study offers a materialistic interpretation of the metaphysical and contributes to the ongoing effort to integrate the natural and social sciences.*

**Keywords:** *ethnicity, ethnogenesis, cultural evolution, kin selection, ancient Judaism, inclusive fitness, Deuteronomy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering that the expansions and evolutions of Judaic traditions eventually gave rise to the other Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam – the three now collectively constituting the majority of the world's population – the demographic and historical significance of ancient Jewish populations cannot be overstated. Judaism is, however, uniquely pragmatic among the Abrahamic faiths by having far less

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emphasis on the afterlife and eschatology than Christianity and Islam. The foundational book considered sacred in Judaism is the Torah or Pentateuch. Its final chapter is called Deuteronomy: a Greek name given to what Jews originally deemed the *Devarim* or [Ultimate] Words. It is a summation of a supposed deity, 'The Lord God,' Jehovah's ethical guidelines for his 'Chosen People.' The theories of biologist Richard Dawkins and sociobiologist Pierre L. van den Berghe offer explanatory frameworks for the (ethnically motivated) doctrines expounded within it.

I contend that the portrayed unity of Jehovah's ontology, as well as His apparent focus on the matters of fecundity, progeny, familial relations, and so forth, is due to His status as the personification of a monolithic and Dawkinsian will to like-gene proliferation: a consciously self-absorbed fertility-principle. This will become apparent by expounding and interlinking several themes throughout Deuteronomy: (1) ethnic territoriality, (2) intraspecific competition, (3) endogamous fertility, (4) nepotistic behavior, (5) linguistic progenitorial inculcation, (6) and metaphysical heterophobia.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A sociobiological perspective of ancient Judaism is not unprecedented. For one, popular historian Will Durant (1935) had long ago focused on the roles of family and fertility in his brief but ambitious treatment of ancient Jewish history. Later on, Wolfgang Wickler (1972) would argue for a biological precedent of the Ten Commandments. More recently, Kevin MacDonald (1994) has played a role in popularizing ancient Judaic sociobiology by arguing that Judaism was a 'group evolutionary strategy.' Teehan (2006) furthered the subdiscipline as a whole by making more general biological arguments concerning the historical ontology and genesis of religion. And Seeskin (2016) certainly recognized the primacy of the irrational biological will to life present in the Torah by entitling the conclusion of their treatment on that text 'Choose Life, Deuteronomy 30: 19.'

Most recently, Nathan Cofnas (2018) has critiqued MacDonald's work, raising two main points: he had not substantively proved that ancient Jewish populations were particularly nepotistic or even that nepotism was a predominant sociocultural force. These objections are not methodologically decisive within the context of the present analysis. Even Marxist scholars, whose metaphysics is essentially composed of economic class conflict, are intellectually embracing that inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflicts play a greater role in history, following the

work of Robinson (2005). More importantly, while thematically relevant to the conversation, such critiques are less so methodologically, as this piece applies a general Dawkinsian theory to an idealized social construct – Law. It is more concerned with the intentionality of the authors and communicators of the Torah rather than any possible real-world demographic effects its dissemination might have had. This does not assume conscious biological calculation on the part of an author, but rather sees the text as one particular artifact shaped by ongoing selection pressures. Empirically and demographically speaking, however, *The Rise of Christianity* has been tracked brilliantly by Rodney Stark (1997). Similarly exhaustive studies into the adjacent faiths of Judaism and Islam, unfortunately, remain esoteric if not nonexistent. These would resolve some historiographic questions exemplified by debates, such as those between MacDonald (1994) and Cofnas (2018).

In the face of insufficient paleodemographic evidence, this work analyzes cultural intentionality by viewing language as a form of social genetics that bridges the semantic and physical worlds and must similarly adapt to environments as organisms do.

Finally, some notes on Hebrew-English philology relevant to this project are in order. I am certainly not fluent in Biblical Hebrew, making my opinions on the matter largely a product of taking several scholars' expertise at face value. In any case, the Hebrew often translated into 'Listen' and 'Love' often has slightly different meanings than may be initially inferred. Those words might be better contextually interpreted as 'Obey' and 'Worship,' a truth conveyed quite directly even in English translations at times (Deut. 30: 14). Appreciating those two concepts is integral to the Anglosphere attempting to understand the sociobiological themes of Deuteronomy. Regarding direct biblical references, all passages herein are taken from the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (2013), as they are considered exceptionally direct, at least when judged amongst and against other popular, more literary English translations. While some have critiqued this directness, it serves our purposes well. So, let us move on to Deuteronomy's sociobiological themes.

### **3. BODY**

#### **Territoriality**

The notion of territoriality – providing suitable land for the Jewish ethny (i.e., a self-consciously discrete ethnic population) – is central to Deuteronomy. In fact, the very first sentence said to be uttered by God

to Moses in the book is, ‘You have stayed long enough in this mountainous region’ (Deut. 1: 6). This focus is because a discrete domain is essential to the production of an ethny – ethnicities themselves being largely driven by a Dawkinsian will to like-gene proliferation. Therefore, Jehovah, the monolithic personification of this will, ‘has given the land over to you’ (Deut. 1: 21). The seventh chapter of Deuteronomy is crucial for discussing territoriality. It lists a series of unified commands allegedly given to the Israelites by Jehovah as they prepared to take control over more territory. Biology, evolutionary psychology, and *ecology* serve to explain them. It is useful to think in biogeographic terms, like ‘boundary maintenance.’

The commands that are given by God throughout Deuteronomy (to make war with other nations and destroy their religious idols – or to avoid exogamy, for example),<sup>2</sup> serve as exemplary instances of territorial and ethnic boundary maintenance. Sociobiological strategies like nepotism and intraspecific competition are largely predicated on discrete biogeographic boundaries. For these reasons, Jehovah divides humankind into four main sections: men, women, children, and resident foreigners (Deut. 31: 12). However, in addition to the concern of keeping themselves discrete genetically and spatially, they must also consider this over the course of time, leading to the variety of other relevant themes like the inculcation of values, endogamous fertility, nepotism, metaphysical heterophobia, and intraspecific competition. While we will expound on these themes, it is crucial to note their biocological roots in territoriality.<sup>3</sup>

### **Intraspecific Competition**

‘... [Y]ou must strike down every male in it with the sword... That is what you will do to all the cities very far away from you’ (Deut. 20: 14–15)... As a result of territoriality, intraspecific competition occurs. Modern thinkers have struggled to reconcile these facts and their inclusion in the Bible with ‘Christian Ideals’ (Wells 2021). In any case, the chosen people are commanded to fight primarily over land, as is evidenced by a passage when Jehovah recommends *against* intraspecific competition: ‘Do not engage in hostilities with them, for I will not give you any of their land...’ (Deut. 2: 5). So, with the semantic chain extended, let us move to the topic of intraspecific competition.

Deuteronomic Law is more indicative of a Dawkinsian – rather than a Darwinian – worldview. The basic units of evolutionary analysis employed within these two cosmologies convey a conceptual bifurcation. The core concepts for Darwin were individual ‘fitness’ and (The Origin of) Species, natural products of numerical relative fecun-

dity imbalances, and morphologically apparent genetic variation between organisms across eons. But for Dawkins, ‘inclusive fitness’ – based on the gene – was the central concept of biological analysis. This was a fortunate evolution of theory made possible by the greater physicochemical understanding of genetics emerging in the mid-twentieth century – Watson and Crick (1953), most famously.

Thus, Deuteronomy does not promote total fertility among the species but favors those of a like ethny, a behavior selected by the ‘selfish gene.’ Those with whom the Israelites do not share a genetic affinity are seen as only good for their thermodynamic potential, be that in the form of livestock, goods, or slave labor. For example, Moses is commanded by Jehovah that, should the Israelites ‘approach a city to fight against it, you should also announce to it terms of peace... [such that] all the people found there will become yours for forced labor’ (Deut. 20: 10–11). To understand these sentiments from a Dawkinsian perspective, let us reference anthropologist Pierre L. van den Berghe:

From the point of view of [Dawkinsian] evolution... change takes place at the genic level, and organisms are but ephemeral ‘survival machines’ for potentially eternal genes... To maximize their reproduction, genes program organisms to do two things: successfully compete against... organisms that carry alternative alleles... and successfully cooperate with... organisms that share the same alleles (Van den Berghe 1981: 7).

Thus, Deuteronomy recommends the employment of intense intraspecific competition – arguably to the point of genocide – against other peoples. Deuteronomy 2: 31 – 3: 13 tells of the Israelites' extensive military campaigns under Moses's command: ‘We then captured all his cities... And we took all the livestock and the spoil of the cities for ourselves’ (Deut. 3: 4–7). Jehovah makes it quite clear that he is the personification of an irrational will to life when He says to the Israelites – concerning their enemies: ‘You must not be afraid of them, for Jehovah your God is the one fighting’ (Deut. 3: 22). Thus, the preponderance of religiously motivated violence seen throughout human history is not quite as enigmatic when one sees its broader evolutionary context of intraspecific competition for resources for the promotion of endogamous fertility and ethnicity production.

### Endogamous Fertility and Ethnic Production

Moving from the theme of competition to that of cooperation, a thread running throughout Deuteronomy is the supposed biological vitality of the allegedly discrete Israelite people. Moses himself is said to have lived until the age of 120 and all the while: 'His eyes had not grown dim, and his strength had not departed' (Deut. 34: 7). Moreover, the emphasis in Deuteronomy on the Israelites being a biologically discrete and exalted people group reflects anthropologist Pierre L. van den Berghe's work on ethnicity, in that it refers to 'a shared cultural heritage[:]:... language, religion, ancestry, [etc.]' (Van den Berghe 1981). The Israelites are to be a unique 'chosen' people who 'observe all his commandments' (Deut. 26: 18). Such social strategies of uniformity are primarily born out of the long-term evolutionary patterns marked by ingroup cooperation and outgroup competition.

The primary form of competition between ethnic groups takes the form of relative female fecundity. This is due to some basic biology pertaining to the male and female sexes. While sperm are many, and biological males do not experience gestation, ova are far fewer, and gestation periods in biologically female mammals put a far greater limit on their potential reproductive output. Moreover, we must also recognize the greater potential of hypergamous strategies amongst females. The combination of these factors led Van den Berghe to conceive of ethnies as 'a corporation of related men seeking to enhance each other's fitness by retaining a monopoly of sexual access to the women of their own group' (Van den Berghe 1981: 26). Mosaic Law is meant to retain this reproductive monopoly, evidenced by its discussion on 'optimal' marriage and divorce practices. It is said that, should a man divorce his wife and she be subsequently wed to another man, he is not to take her back 'after she has been defiled' (Deut. 24: 4). In days before paternity tests, such practices were the only way to ensure that one did not invest into offspring in a manner that would reduce inclusive fitness.

The Israelite 'covenant with god' also goes as far biologically as to degrade exogamy, reflecting adaptive biological principles of nepotism and the Dawkinsian 'selfish gene': 'You must not form any marriage alliances with them... For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods' (Deut. 7: 3-4). This sentiment is repeated throughout the work.<sup>4</sup> However, evolution (Jehovah) must also consider the line between endogamous and incestual reproduction. Hence, Jehovah curses 'the one who lies down with his sister'

(Deut. 27: 22). With these ideas about the relationship between religion and ethnicity floating around, also consider just how many ancient societies justified their hierarchies with claims to a 'divine lineage.' God is, himself, among other things, a personification of a unified force of fertility seen within a particular sociocultural context.<sup>5</sup> With that expressed, we can discuss the inverse of intraspecific competition, nepotism.

### **Nepotism**

Deuteronomy consistently features nepotistic commands: 'You must not hate an Edomite for he is your brother' (Deut. 23: 7).<sup>6</sup> Sociocultural and sociobiological unity conveys direct ecological advantages. This is why nepotistic individuals amongst *homo sapiens* and other organisms have been 'selected for.' Increased intra-ethnic cooperation makes perennial intraspecific and ecological competition more manageable, thus vastly increasing a population's (or a gene's) inclusive fitness. In this light, phenomena like ethnocentrism and racism can generally be seen as extended forms of kin selection (Van den Berghe 1981: 18). In our context, enhanced cultural, religious, and sociobiological unity meant the Israelites could 'go in and dispossess nations greater and mightier' (Deut. 9: 1).

The various laws set for property rights and inheritances, as well as the emphasis on vulnerable members of their communities and sharing, are primary examples of ingroup cooperation being promoted.<sup>7</sup> The work repeatedly claims that one ought to give greater leniency to those with whom the lender or neighbor shares a genetic affinity. However, in accordance with biology, this could not reach the extent of parasitism: 'If you enter your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat enough grapes to satisfy your appetite, but you should not put any in your container' (Deut. 23: 24). The promotion of nepotism is most apparent in the fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy via the rules concerning finance and charity:

You may demand payment from the foreigner, but one should release your claim on whatever your brother owes you... If any of your brothers becomes poor among you in one of your cities of the land that Jehovah your God is giving you, do not harden your heart or be tightfisted toward your poor brother. For you should generously open your hand to him and by all means lend whatever he needs or is lacking (Deut. 15: 3–8).<sup>8</sup>

Another pillar of ethnicity formation and nepotism is reverence for one's ancestors, which the Bible often reflects, such as in the following passage: 'Honor your father and your mother... so that you may prosper in the land that Jehovah your God is giving you' (Deut. 5: 16).<sup>9</sup> This naturally leads us to the topic of progenitorial linguistic and sociocultural inculcation.

### **Linguistic Inculcation**

Because the Israelites who partook in the Egyptian Exodus had barred themselves from receiving 'God's Covenant' (Numbers 14: 22–23), that bequeathing process canonically befell the next generation.<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy recounts Moses pleading with the new generation of Israelites to follow the linguistic commandments of God: 'Now this is the Law that Moses set before the people of Israel' (Deut. 4: 44). This is so they may receive the Covenant and preserve their own lives and those of their ancestors.<sup>11</sup> And, to be meaningful on evolutionary timescales, this inculcation and subordination of individualism to collective ethnic wellbeing must perennially perpetuate itself as all organisms similarly do.<sup>12</sup>

Deuteronomic Law expresses the primacy of imparting values to one's offspring: 'These words that I am commanding you today must be on your heart, and you must inculcate them in your sons and speak of them [often]' (Deut. 6: 6–7).<sup>13</sup> While this is crucial, imparting values to one's contemporaneous kinsmen is not enough. Evolution plays a long game. Linguistic ideals serve as cultural genetics – producing contemporaneous sociocultural changes parallel to biological evolution. Consider three factors. Because speech is generally learned from one's ancestors, is necessary for assimilation within a group, and one can often only fully express oneself in one's native tongue, the idea of biological ethnicity greatly overlaps with that of a language (Van den Berghe 1981: 34). This is likely why we are told not to take God's name in vain, as it would challenge the confluence of ethnic, linguistic, and social coherence being aimed at.<sup>14</sup>

Just as genetic material becomes recombined, expressing a slightly new iteration of a primordial morphology, so too must the Israelites be concerned with the adaptive propagation of their values over time. This necessarily calls for slight revisions despite a strict adherence to general guidelines. Culture is a mechanism via which organisms might quickly adapt to their evolving environments and situations (Van den Berghe 1981: 10). Thus, Rabbinic law reflects these concerns, designed to preserve a longstanding core of values and procedures and be adaptable to evolving situations. Such long-term cultural strategies – primarily via

the dissemination of literature— can be seen as a form of ‘social genetics’ (language) occurring alongside biology. Mosaic Law is the ‘DNA’, so to speak, whereas Rabbinic Law would be RNA.

The finality of Jehovah's word is compared to that of a paterfamilias.<sup>15</sup> This is especially apt in the context of the ancient Near East. The danger of straying from Jehovah's Word can be seen with excruciating detail in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. The punishments are the worst possible fates that might befall one from (among others) a strictly thermodynamic biological perspective: ‘Cursed will be your children and the fruit of your ground and your young cattle and sheep... You will become engaged to a woman, but another man will [copulate with her by force]... the fruitage of your ground and all that you produce will be eaten by a people whom you have not known’ (Deut. 28: 18–33). Outside these cursed prophecies, direct capital punishment is sometimes recommended to enforce the ethical-linguistic (religious) status quo. For example, if one's son is apparently rebellious, gluttonous, or a drunkard in the community, they are to ‘stone him to death’ (Deut. 21: 18–21).<sup>16</sup> In light of these dangers, both real and promised, the adherence to Jehovah necessarily makes him a monolithic entity.

### **Metaphysical Heterophobia**

While the admonishing of other faith traditions in a religious text is something of a common feature, the theological unitarianism of God becomes so pervasive as to constitute a metaphysical heterophobia, *i.e.*, a rejection of all non-conforming ontologies. Why else would Jehovah tell the Israelites not to use ‘two different stone weights... [or] two different measuring containers’ (Deut. 25: 13) or not to sow their ‘vineyard with two sorts of seed’ (Deut. 22: 9)? These inclusions can be interpreted as part of a broader commitment to ontological and social unity. For these reasons, the Israelites are to ‘...burn the graven images of’ other people's gods (Deut. 7: 25), as Jehovah is ‘a jealous god’ (Exodus 20: 5). Just as gravitational theory forms the basis of understanding physical phenomena, the fundamentally irrational biological will to exist is an anthropological cornerstone. Its fundamentalism makes it intolerant of any other influences.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

The scholarship from the social sciences regarding religion, ethnicity, and the relation between these subjects has often been limited by its lack of biological rigor.<sup>17</sup> With the hopes of ameliorating these conditions in the world of sociology, Pierre L. van den Berghe proposed a genetic

perspective based on the Neo-Darwinian work of Richard Dawkins. By applying Pierre L. van den Berghe's Dawkinsian notions of socio-biology, we can understand Deuteronomy at a more physicochemically fundamental level than the extant cultural, religious, and philological perspectives allow. Such biological perspectives are ultimately thermodynamically oriented—interested in how organisms partake in and adapt to energy flows within ecological circumstances. Such biophysical studies are, therefore, essential for providing materialistic models of religious growth, a phenomenon of utmost historical significance. A biologically informed sociology of religion does not replace extant theological, philological, or otherwise literary analyses, but situates them within an empirical framework.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I mean the word heterophobia in a strictly etymological, rather than sexual sense: a combination of the fears of outsiders (xenophobia) and disorder (ataxia-phobia); it has nothing to do with the heterosexual orientation.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kelly Sowards, for example, pointed to how Deuteronomy 25: 5–10 is meant to disinhibit exogamous reproduction (Sowards 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Territoriality is often directly linked to the inculcation process in the text, for example. Consider the following passages: 'Now, O Israel, listen to the regulations... so that you may... take possession of the land that Jehovah... is giving you' (Deut. 4: 1). 'You should walk in all the way that Jehovah your God has commanded you, in order that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will take possession of' (Deut. 5: 33).

<sup>4</sup> It was also preempted in Exodus 'I will set your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines and from the wilderness to the River, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your land, and you will drive them out from before you. You must not make a covenant with them or their gods. They should not dwell in your land so that they may not cause you to sin against me...' (Exodus 23: 31–33).

<sup>5</sup> 'You should be careful to observe every commandment that I am giving you today so that you may continue living and multiply and go in and take possession of the land about which Jehovah swore to your forefathers' (Deut. 8: 1).

<sup>6</sup> The reason for this ethnic affinity, of course, goes all the way back to Genesis: 'When the time came for her to give birth, look! Twins were in her womb. Then the first came out red all over and was like garment of hair, so they named him E'sau. After that his brother came out and his hand was holding onto the heel of E'sau so he named him Jacob...' (Genesis 25: 24–26).

<sup>7</sup> 'If you see your brother's bull or his sheep going astray, do not deliberately ignore it. You should without fail lead it back to your brother... This is what you should do with his donkey... and with anything that your brother has lost and you have found' (Deut. 22: 1–4).

<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is then repeated: ‘You must not make your brother pay interest... [However you] may make a foreigner pay interest’ (Deut. 23: 19).

<sup>9</sup> Also consider: ‘Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt’ (Deut. 27: 16).

<sup>10</sup> Recall when Moses is recorded to have said: ‘It was not with our forefathers that Jehovah made this covenant, but with us, all of us alive here today’ (Deut. 5: 3).

<sup>11</sup> The most famous passage therein, which became a prayer common amongst Jews across centuries, is: ‘Listen, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah. You must love God with all of your heart and all of your soul, and all your strength’ (Deut. 6: 4–5).

<sup>12</sup> The authors of Deuteronomy were evidently familiar with the fact that the abandonment of old values would most likely happen during periods of significant windfalls: ‘When Jehovah your God brings you... great and fine cities that you did not build, houses full of all sorts of good things that you did not work for... and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant... be careful not to forget Jehovah’ (Deut. 6: 10–12). This sentiment is further repeated near the end of the Old Testament: ‘They were satisfied with their pastures... And so they forgot me’ (Hosea 13: 6).

<sup>13</sup> You may also corroborate this sentiment with the passage: ‘You must impress these words of mine on your heart and your soul and bind them as a reminder on your hand, and they should be like a headband on your forehead’ (Deut. 11: 18–21).

<sup>14</sup> ‘You must not take up the name of Jehovah your God in a worthless way, for Jehovah will not leave anyone unpunished who takes up his name in a worthless way’ (Deut. 5: 11).

<sup>15</sup> ‘You well know in your heart that just as a man corrects his son, Jehovah your God was correcting you’ (Deut. 8: 5)... ‘Jehovah then said to me [Moses], ‘I have seen this people, and look! It is an obstinate people’ (Deut. 9: 13).

<sup>16</sup> (Consider that it does not include daughters, with reference to the aforementioned note on the relative temporalized reproductive efficiencies of the two biological sexes).

<sup>17</sup> Much has been said, however about the role of cleanliness and biology in influencing the dietary commandments, disease-prevention methods, and the practice of circumcision of the Israelite. Concerning cholera, see Mazokopakis (2019). Regarding diet, Deuteronomy 5: 3–21 outlines both what animals are fit for consumption and in what conditions they ought to be consumed. There have also been discussions of the unclean birds depicted in Deuteronomy 14 (Angelini and Nihan 2020).

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