

You Will Become My People:
Pentateuchal Attitudes Toward Identity Transformation

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The Hebrew Bible is a powerful source for the formation of identity, whether Israelite, Jewish, or Christian, national, ethnic, or spiritual. It is not surprising that the Pentateuch, a collection of texts describing cosmic, social, and political origins, is elemental to this process. But identity formation, like biblical creation, is not *ex nihilo*. Rather, something inchoate is molded, divided, refined: identity is realized through transformation. This seems natural in contemporary western society, where the self is subjective, affected by internal and external forces, disrupted and redefined throughout an individual's lifetime. In fact, identity in the Pentateuch is no more stable. This study intends to define and locate identity transformation in the Pentateuch. In describing this literary phenomenon, a literary approach is most appropriate; historical-critical methods can later address the implications of the description.

Identity Transformation

To examine identity transformation in the Pentateuch, there must be criteria for defining identity in this corpus. These are not likely to come from the social sciences; attaining the self-concept or definitively delimiting the personality of a biblical character is highly speculative, tending toward midrashic psychoanalysis. From a literary point of view, we must describe identity by what is most readily available and what is most objective. The following aspects satisfy: name, body, occupation, and group membership.

Name is the most immediate aspect of identity, and likely to be the first answer to the question “who are you?”¹ Names in the Bible may be especially important as signifiers of another aspect of identity. They may signify group membership, identifying nationality or ethnicity by language, or religion by theophoric elements. Biblical authors (and their characters) frequently assign names midrashically, so names may also signify occupation. Thus Eve is a life giver, Jacob is a supplanter, Moses is the one who draws out.

The condition and appearance of the body are the most visible expressions of identity; an observer can identify who a person is based on what a person looks like. Like names, the biblical body often signifies another aspect of identity. So circumcision signifies group membership, and priestly vestments signify existential occupation.

Occupation does not refer to one’s business (necessarily), but to one’s existential role or purpose. In the case of biblical characters, what they do is often an essential part of who they are, a central aspect of their characterization. This includes, for example, Cain’s occupation as one who works the soil or Moses’ as a lawgiver, but also Abraham’s occupation as the father of many nations or Yhwh’s as the one who takes Israel out of Egypt.

Group membership suggests the existence of in-groups and out-groups, “us” and “them.” Much of biblical literature emphasizes the distinction between such groups, dividing them along ethnic, religious, or national lines. A loss of membership at any of these levels is an identity transformation wherein the “self” becomes the “other,” effectively a loss of identity.

Promise: Genesis

Identity transformation in the Pentateuch begins at creation. In Genesis 2, God desires a

1. There are three responses to this question in biblical narrative, two of which include names: “I am Esau, your first-born” (Gen 27.18); “I am your son, your first-born, Esau” (27.32); “I am an Amalekite” (2 Sam 1.8).

companion for the first human, and discovers through trial and error that this *'ādām* is peerless, existentially unique. God forms woman, a creative act that transforms the identity of the *'ādām*. Having undergone an invasive surgery, the human is changed in body. Man and woman are also sexually differentiated, something not possible before the woman's creation.² In occupation, the human has gone from being a wholly singular creature to the male and female of the species. The man's work remains the tending of the garden, but there is now a new human endeavor: a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his woman, so that they become one flesh (Gen 2.24). Finally, there is a transformation in terminology, if not exactly in name. Until Gen 3.23, the creature had been called by the noun *'ādām*, not a name, but a general term for humanity. Only now, with the creation of woman, can there be *'iš* and *'iššā*. The episode is the capstone of this creation account. A transformation of identity completes what is left unfinished, and makes creation finally good.

The woman soon undergoes her own identity transformation. After God discovers the truth of the humans' disobedience, he tells the woman that he will increase her pain in childbearing and make the man her ruler and the object of her longing (Gen 2.16). This amounts to a drastic change in the woman's occupation. In this account, there is no earlier reference to reproduction; motherhood is a newly pronounced role for the woman.³ In relation to the man, her occupation was to be *'ēzer kānegdô*, a corresponding companion (2.18).⁴ Now she is his subject. At the end of this episode the man compounds the transformation by naming her "Eve." This is a reflection and aspect of her new identity as "the mother of all the living" (3.20), but also underscores the man's dominance; he names the animals as well as her.

2. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 94–105.

3. Motherhood represents something of an existential reversal for the woman. The man proclaims at her creation that she will be called *'iššā*, being taken from *'iš*. As noted by Rashi, this changes once she bears children: man will come out of woman.

4. Trans. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 88.

The next identity transformations are those of Avram and Sarai. In Genesis 17, Avram becomes the beneficiary of a covenant with God and receives the promise of offspring and land. This is a transformation in Avram's occupation, which God signifies with a new name: Avram becomes Abraham, who will be the father of a multitude of nations (17.4). At God's command, Abraham inaugurates the practice of circumcision, a transformation in body. Sarai's identity is disrupted along the same lines. God renames her Sarah, which does not lexically signify a new occupation; however, as with Abraham, God now announces that nations and kings will come from her (17.15–16).⁵ There is no corresponding female circumcision, but Sarah is promised a change in body: she will become pregnant, a transformation so remarkable that Abraham falls down laughing (17.17).

Jacob experiences a transformation in identity in Genesis 32. At the Jabbok ford, Jacob wrestles with a divine being all night, and in the morning is renamed Israel (32.29). The name signifies a change in occupation. Jacob was a man of constant strife; he cannot even flee for his life from Esau without being assaulted by a divine being. Now, says his combatant, Jacob is a victor. As Rashi notes, he will no longer be called *ya 'āqōb* because he need no longer succeed through *'āqābā*. The divine being leaves Jacob with an injury, a change in body so much a part of Jacob's identity that it justifies a dietary restriction in the author's own time (32.33). The change in Jacob's name is repeated in Genesis 35, at Bethel. God (redundantly) renames him Israel, tells him that nations and kings will issue from him, and assigns the land to his descendants (32.9–12). As with Abraham, Jacob's new identity is linked with the divine promise of land and offspring.

Identity is a major theme of the story of Joseph, where its transformation is gradual,

5. Rashi does see this name change as a signifier of her new occupation. "Sarai" means "my princess," from Abraham's point of view. "Sarah" removes the exclusivity, as she becomes the mother of and a princess over multitudes.

equivocal, and incomplete. The brothers' mistaking Joseph's identity gives the climax its dramatic weight, and even readers may finally wonder, who is Joseph? Has the victimized Hebrew dreamer truly become a ruthless Egyptian bureaucrat? His journey is one of great change. In bodily terms, the cloak that visually identifies him is stolen and bloodied; he receives a haircut and a change of clothes when brought before Pharaoh; Pharaoh bestows upon Joseph his signet ring, fine clothes, and a gold chain. Whether it is these physical affects or the effects of time, Joseph's brothers do not recognize him when they next meet. Pharaoh makes Joseph Egyptian in name as well as appearance, dubbing him Zaphenath-Paneah (Gen 41.45).⁶ Joseph seems to acknowledge his own identity transformation with the naming of his son Manasseh, declaring that he has forgotten his hardships and his father's house (41.51).⁷ This could amount to a change in group membership and a transformation into the Egyptian "other," the man Joseph's brothers believe him to be. But Joseph never truly abandons his Hebrew identity, and his story ends with recognition and reconciliation. His transformation into an Egyptian is incomplete.

There are several characters in Genesis whose identities seem to change temporarily. In each case, the agent is not God, but another character, and the purpose is deception. Abraham twice passes Sarah off as his sister, to fool the Egyptians and then the Philistines (Genesis 12; 20); Isaac does the same with Rebekah in Philistia (Genesis 26); and Rebekah turns Jacob into Esau to trick Isaac (Genesis 27).⁸ These identity assumptions are a different phenomenon from

6. The name likely means "the god says that he shall live" (although, unusually for this kind of Egyptian name, no god is specified). See Alan R. Schulman, "On the Egyptian Name of Joseph: A New Approach," *SAK* 2 (1974), 239–43.

7. Based on other usages of the verb *NŠH*, Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 237, translates "God has released me from all the debt of my hardship, and all of my father's house." Joseph's shifting identity justifies the more popular "forget."

8. Beside these, Laban apparently tries to pass Leah off as Rachel on Jacob's wedding night (Gen 29), and Tamar allows Judah to believe she is a prostitute (Gen 38). But these should not be counted as episodes of identity assumption, in which there is an actual claim made on the assumed identity: "she is my sister" (12.19; 20.2; 26.7), "I am Esau" (27.19).

the transformations that produce Abraham, Sarah, and Israel. But they are similar to the transformation of Joseph: his identity does not fully and permanently change, and he deceitfully hides his true identity from his brothers. God does not even appear to be the agent: Joseph's brothers expel him from his group, and Pharaoh promotes and renames him. However, Joseph insists that God is responsible for his journey, from pit to palace: "it was not you who sent me here, but God" (45.8), "God has made me lord of all Egypt" (45.9), "although you intended me harm, God intended it for good" (50.20). Even though Pharaoh replaces his Hebrew name, Joseph attributes his sense of lost identity to God, saying at the naming of Manasseh, "God has made me forget" (41.51).

Power: The Exodus

The question of who Joseph is resolves at the climax of his story when his brothers finally recognize him; sometime after his death, there arises a new king of Egypt who does not know who Joseph is (Exod 1.8). Again, a Pharaoh obscures Joseph's identity, but this time the Israelites suffer rather than prosper. The Egyptian oppression intends to limit Israelite numbers (1.10), a plan in direct opposition to God's promise of innumerable offspring and God's purpose so far in transforming identity. God counters Pharaoh's unfamiliarity when remembering the patriarchs: "God saw the Israelites, and God knew" (2.25).

This conflict between God and Pharaoh anticipates their dispute over Israel's deliverance, depicted as a contest between the two powers. But while one Pharaoh oppresses Israel because of his unfamiliarity with Joseph, another denies their freedom in the ignorance of who God is. When Moses and Aaron first appear before the Egyptian king to relay God's command, Pharaoh responds "Who is Yhwh that I should obey him and send Israel away? I do not know Yhwh, so I will not send Israel away" (Exod 5.2). At the heart of the exodus event is the answer to Pharaoh's

question and a demonstration of God's identity. Through signs and wonders and the deliverance of Israel, "the Egyptians will know that I am Yhwh" (7.5, 17; 14.4, 18), "you will know that there is none like Yhwh" (8.6), "you will know that I, Yhwh, am in the midst of the land" (8.18), "you will know that there is none like me in all the land" (9.14), "my name will be told of in all the land" (9.16), "you will know that the land is Yhwh's" (9.29).

God's identity is central to the exodus; fittingly, it is now God whose identity undergoes the most significant transformation. The divine name changes, as the book of Exodus twice relates the revelation of the tetragrammaton (Exod 3.13–15; 6.2). In Exodus 3, God associates the divine name Yhwh with the verb "to be," first identifying himself as *'ehyeh āšer 'ehyeh* and simply *'ehyeh* (3.14).⁹ As the new names of Avram and Jacob signify changes in occupation, so does the tetragrammaton. *'Ehyeh āšer 'ehyeh* suggests that this nature is self evident; so it will be, as the wondrous acts of the deliverance will make it known that God is Yhwh. The God of the Fathers is becoming the God of the Exodus, with a name that itself pronounces a transformation; "I am who I am" may be "I will be who I will be."

Exodus 6.2–8 presents an alternate version of God's renaming, in a structurally complex divine speech. Here, God makes the change in identity, the newness of the name, explicit: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name Yhwh known to them" (6.3). The tetragrammaton frames the speech, with the declaration *'ānî yhwh* occurring four times: as the opening and closing words in verses 2 and 8, and between them in verses 6 and 7. Between the second and third *'ānî yhwh*, in verse 7, is a mutually transformative statement: "I will take you to be my people, and I will become your God." This serves as a hinge between the

9. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 36, suggests that the proper name that God reveals is *'ehyeh*, a form of *HYH/HWH* in the first person; *yhwh* is a third person form, "he is," which Moses must use when relating this encounter to the Israelites (an explanation already put forward by Rashbam). If this were the case, God's name would be transformed twice in as many verses.

promises of verses 2–6 (“I established my covenant...to give them the land...I will free you”) and the fulfillment of verses 7–8 (“I am Yhwh who frees you...I will bring you into the land...to give it to you as a possession”). As in Genesis, identity transformation perpetuates the promise. But here God’s new name gives the phenomenon a new dimension, signifying a change in occupation. The first and fourth *’ānî yhwh* refer to the land sworn to the patriarchs, while the second and third refer to deliverance from Egypt. The means of deliverance in verse 6 is an “outstretched arm,” which parallels how God describes the promise in verse 8: “the land which I raised my hand to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The structural equivalence confirms God’s new occupation as deliverer, the God of the Exodus.

God also undergoes a transformation in body, or at least in its description.¹⁰ In Genesis, God possesses a physical form that is altogether unremarkable, in the sense that the writers fail to remark on it. God strolls noisily through the garden in Eden (Gen 3.8),¹¹ stands beside Jacob in a dream (28.13), and, most significantly, visits Abraham in a form completely indistinguishable from a human being (18.1–22).¹² God is no less substantial beginning in Exodus, but that substance now appears quite differently. From the burning bush (Exod 3.1–6), to the volcanic theophany at Sinai (19.18–24), to the guiding pillar of fire (40.34–38), God is all fiery effulgence.¹³ Where God once physically resembled an *’iš*, the divine body is now the *kābōd*,¹⁴ a splendid and terrible entity of extraordinary light.¹⁵ Abraham could stand beside God, but God

10. The following discussion of God’s body relies on Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 1–3, 58–79.

11. Perhaps enjoying the evening breeze, a bold image of anthropomorphism.

12. The divine being with whom Jacob wrestles appears to be a human (Gen 32.25), but it is ambiguous whether or not this being is Yhwh.

13. God’s new physical manifestation is thus integral to the structure of the book of Exodus. See Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969), 16–17.

14. The term first refers to God’s body in Exod 16.7; it never does so in Genesis. Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 60, notes that *kābōd* must refer to a body at least in Exod 33.18–23, where it has a face, a hand, and a back.

15. For the nature and ancient Near Eastern background of this divine radiance, see most recently Shawn Z. Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and its Biblical Parallels* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 22–121.

says to Moses “no human can look at me and live” (33.20). A thick cloud therefore veils the *kābōd*, shielding the Israelites from the brightness of the divine body. God also now appears to be of superhuman size.¹⁶ The divine presence covers the whole of Mount Sinai (24.16–17), and God’s hand is large enough to completely shield Moses while the rest of God passes him by (33.22).

The transformation of God’s identity is not merely a perpetuation of God’s promise, as the phenomenon appears in Genesis. It is now also a function of God’s power. God’s new name is the one known by friend and enemy alike, through which God gains great fame. God’s new occupation carries with it the might of a wondrous liberator and the sovereignty of a suzerain. God’s new body is power itself, unfathomably large and unspeakably bright.

There is human identity transformation surrounding the exodus, but is subordinate to and intricately entwined with God’s.¹⁷ At the individual level, Moses experiences such a change.¹⁸ He receives his name from Pharaoh’s daughter, when he returns to the royal house as a boy (Exod 2.1–10). Moses is an acceptable enough Egyptian name,¹⁹ but the biblical writers allow Pharaoh’s daughter to explain it midrashically: “She named him Moses (*mōšeh*), and said ‘For I drew him (*māšīṭihū*) from the water” (2.10). Exegetes have long noticed that *mōšeh* appears to be

16. See Mark S. Smith, “Divine Form and Size in Ugaritic and Pre-Exilic Israelite Religion,” *ZAW* 100 (1988), 424–27.

17. There is much physical transformation in Exodus—Numbers that does not constitute identity transformation, but still functions primarily in relation to God’s identity. The affliction of Moses’ hand proves Yhwh is God (Exod 4.1–9); the gruesome plagues allow Egypt to know that Yhwh is God (7.17); Miriam’s skin disease results from an attack on Moses’ experience of God’s identity (Numbers 12).

18. At the corporate level, the Levites undergo a refinement in group membership and a change in occupation as wholly devoted to the cult (Exodus 32; similarly the Nazirites in Numbers 6), and the nation as a whole is to become holy, as God is (Leviticus 17–26, a unit replete with God’s brief self-identification, “I am Yhwh”/“I Yhwh am your God”).

19. It derives from the Egyptian verb *msy*, “to give birth,” and commonly appears with a theophoric element (e.g. Thutmose), though not in this case (Dewey M. Beegle, “Moses: Old Testament,” *ABD* 4:911). The lack of a divine element in Moses’ name is strikingly similar to the same absence in Joseph’s (see n 4 above). Like Joseph, Moses is mistaken for an Egyptian (Exod 2.19), and names a child out of a feeling of alienation (2.22), but ultimately proves himself a thorough Israelite.

active, while the explanation demands a passive form (i.e., *māšuy*, “he was drawn out”).²⁰ But the active form anticipates Moses’ role in the liberation from Egypt, drawing the Israelites out through the Sea of Reeds.²¹ Moses’ name does not change, but its interpretation does, evoking the awesome deeds of the exodus and signifying his new occupation as liberator. Moses mediates God’s commandments at Sinai, and so becomes lawgiver, as does God. These changes mirror God’s transformation in name and occupation, which again point to displays of power in the exodus.

Finally, Moses experiences a transformation in body. He asks God for a more intimate revelation, one that would allow him to behold God’s *kābōd* (Exod 33.18). God agrees to pass bodily before Moses while shielding the mortal from all but his backside, the only way Moses could survive such an encounter (33.19–23). God makes up for allowing Moses only glimpse of the *kabod* by giving him an earful, proclaiming “Yhwh! Yhwh!” and a litany of divine attributes (34.6). This self-identification is reminiscent of God’s in Exodus 3: it prominently features the tetragrammaton, portrays God as a fearsome entity, and describes God’s occupation. Whereas Exodus 3 relates a moment of transition, here God’s transformation is fully realized. God’s name is not newly announced, but reiterated (literally doubled). God’s body is not the intriguing burning bush, but the enormous and lethal *kābōd*. Finally, God’s occupation is not the powerful deity who will liberate, but the totally sovereign God who is himself unbound; God’s awesome power permeates the proclamation. Following this encounter, Moses’ face radiates light, as though in imitation of God’s physical effulgence (34.29). He must wear a veil to keep from frightening the Israelites (34.34–35), just as God must clothe the *kābōd* with a dark cloud. Moses’ transformed body is the reflected image of God’s transformed body, a newly minted

20. Cf. the naming of Saul (*šā’ūl*), “the one asked for/lent,” a midrash now attached to the character Samuel (1 Sam 1.20).

21. A fact also noticed by early exegetes; see Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 43.

šelem ʿēlōhîm. It is also the direct result of Yhwh’s dramatic self-identification. Moses’ commissioning anticipates this imitation of the divine. There, God establishes a chain of command from God to Moses to Aaron, with Aaron playing Moses’ prophet and Moses playing Aaron’s God (4.14–16). This immediately follows the revelation of the tetragrammaton; Moses “becomes Yhwh” to Aaron when God becomes Yhwh in name. The transformation of Moses’ identity is emphatically a function of the transformation of God’s.²²

Preservation: Deuteronomy

The narrative momentum of the Pentateuch comes to a halt in Deuteronomy, presented as Moses’ farewell addresses to a people poised to enter the land of Canaan. The book stands apart from the Tetrateuch with regard to its style;²³ it is almost entirely a work of rhetoric, putting a review of Israelite history, a presentation of law, and the recitation of poetry into the mouth of Moses. There is precious little narrative in which to find identity transformation. The concluding report of Moses’ death offers the following: “Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eye was not dim, and his vitality had not fled...Never again did there arise a prophet like Moses, whom Yhwh knew face to face” (Deut 34.7, 10).²⁴ Moses remains unchanged and

22. The subordination of human transformation to divine is underscored by the extraordinary parity between God and Moses that extends beyond changes in name, occupation, and body: Moses and God speak “face to face” or “mouth to mouth,” like friends (Exod 33.11; Num 12.8); both Moses and God seem to be responsible for the miracle at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14.27; 15.6); the people simultaneously trust in Moses and Yhwh after their escape (14.31); both Moses and God seem undecided on who exactly led the people out of Egypt (32.7–14); in their rebellious grumbling, the people seem to conflate God and Moses (Num 21.5). The identity of Moses seems at times a dim reflection of God’s.

23. For catalogs of Deuteronomistic phraseology, see S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribner’s, 1899), 99–102; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 320–65; and Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Literature of the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Simor, 2009), 196–7.

24. Deuteronomy 34.7 is ascribed to various non-Deuteronomistic sources: to J in Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher* (Berlin: Georg Reimer: 1889), 118; to JE or P in S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark: 1895), 424; to P in S. R. Driver, *Introduction*, 72; to P or J in J. E. Carpenter and G. Harford-Battersby, *The Hexateuch* (London: Longmans, Green, 1900), 2:301; to P in Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 209; to J in Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible With Sources Revealed* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 368.

unmatched. The narrative conveys a striking image of fixity, a condition that Deuteronomy generally promotes over against the transformation of identity.

Deuteronomy is intensely concerned with group membership, delimiting the Israelite “us” in relation to the foreign and unknown “them.” What determines group membership is two-fold experience of the exodus: liberation from Egypt and partnership in Yhwh’s covenant. The exodus is the single moment of identity transformation upon which all of Israelite history pivots. A Deuteronomic review of the past finds no transformations that are not connected to its own Mosaic setting, of which not even God’s renaming and Moses’ transfiguration are a part.²⁵ Any transformation subsequent to the exodus will not be the advent of a new self, but of an unknown other.²⁶

It is covenant violation that effects the loss of identity. Where Israel is unified and innumerable (Deut 1.10), disobedient Israel will be scattered and few (4.27; 28.62, 64). Israel’s occupation is to serve Yhwh (10.12), of whom the people have experience (*’āšer rā’û ’ēnekā*, 10.21); after breach of covenant, Israel will serve other gods, whom they do not know (4.28; 28.36, 64), and their own human enemies (28.48). Individual identity dissolves as well, as families are stolen and lineages put to an end (28.30, 32). Yhwh will wipe away the apostate Israelite’s name (29.19), a striking twist on name changes in positive identity formation. In body, God will afflict Israel with incurable skin disease (28.27), from head to foot – a complete bodily transformation (28.35). There will be further dehumanization, physical, as the peoples’ corpses become food for animals (28.26), and metaphysical, as the people become “a horror, a proverb, and a taunt” (28.37).

25. The “creed” of Deut 26.5–10 recalls the patriarchs and the increase in Israelite numbers in relation to the deliverance from Egypt (cf. 10.22).

26. Deuteronomy has a dim view, perhaps even a fear of the unknown. Israel “does not know” foreign gods they might serve (Deut 11.28; 13.3, 7, 14; 28.64; 29.25; 32.17), enemies they might face (28.33, 49), and afflictions they might endure (28.61).

That this is a change in group membership and loss of specifically Israelite identity is underscored by the fact that non-Israelites share many of these fates. Breach of covenant explicitly results in perishing “like the nations which Yhwh makes perish” (Deut 8.20). To serve other gods is the occupation not of Israel, but of other peoples, by Yhwh’s own design (4.19). Obedient Israel will obliterate the names of their enemies (7.24; 12.3). Israel should not become food (*ma’ākāl*), but should consume (*wə’ākaltā*) the peoples they aim to dispossess (7.16). Afflictions are intended for other nations (7.15), and are especially associated with Egypt (7.15; 28.27, 60); by suffering such diseases, Israelite bodies become like Egyptian bodies.²⁷

To safeguard against identity loss, Deuteronomy prescribes a program of fixity that permeates its ideology. The torah itself is fixed; Yhwh commands that Israel not add to it or subtract from it (Deut 4.2; 13.1). The root *ŠMR*, “keep/observe/be careful,” occurs more times in Deuteronomy than in any other biblical book,²⁸ with 66 of its 73 occurrences demanding that Israel keep the commandments.²⁹ In fact, if Israel keeps the commandments, Yhwh himself will keep the covenant (7.12). Prosperity is not transformation, but maintenance. There is a strong emphasis on the faithful transmission of the torah as well as its performance,³⁰ Israelites must teach the torah to their children (4.9; 6.7, 20–25; 11.19), or Israel’s ruin will be taught to future generations and foreigners (29.21). Memory of past experiences and present obligations must also be fixed. The roots *ZKR*, “remember” (in the *qal*), and *ŠKH*, “forget,” each occur more times in Deuteronomy than in any other book (except Psalms).³¹ Israel’s survival depends on a reliable memory: if they forget Yhwh and his commandments, they perish (8.19).

27. Deuteronomy 7.18–19 promises that Israel’s future enemies will be treated like Egypt, establishing deeper equivalence between Israel and the nations.

28. 13 more times than in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers combined.

29. See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 336–7.

30. *Ibid.*, 298–306.

31. *ZKR* (*qal*) occurs 15 times, 3 more than in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers combined. *ŠKH* occurs 14 times in Deuteronomy, and not in any other legal material.

Muted transformation and arguments for fixity are present in some Deuteronomic laws. Deuteronomy 17.14–20 puts severe restrictions on the royal person and office, diminishing the occupational transformation of the man who would be king. Yhwh will choose (*yibḥar*; 17.15) the king, a process no different than Yhwh’s choosing all Israel (7.6, 7; 10.15; 14.2) and the Levites (18.5). God twice demands that the king be an *’āh*, a designation suggesting no elevated status (17.15). The king will enjoy no more luxuries than his fellows (17.16–17). As much as every common Israelite, the king must keep the commandments of the torah, and “learn to fear Yhwh his God” (17.19; cf. 4.10; 31.12, 13). So minimal is his transformation that the king will not think himself better than the people (17.20). In Deut 21.15–17 is a law concerning the rights of an unloved wife (21.15–17). If this woman bears her husband’s firstborn son, the man cannot accord the firstborn’s due to the son of his loved wife. This is an argument for fixity running counter to the patriarchal narratives, which view such disruption positively.

There are also laws describing negative identity transformation or loss of identity. The law concerning a beautiful female captive sees the woman undergo a physical transformation before becoming an Israelite’s wife (Deut 21.10–14). Although she has rights within the community, her group affiliation is unclear; this woman does not explicitly become an Israelite. More apparent is the loss of her native identity, realized when she spends a month wailing for her father and mother. The law of Levirate marriage is another example (25.5–10). A levir’s duty is to father a child “established in the name”³² of his deceased brother, “so that his name will not be wiped away in Israel” (25.6). The law prescribes fixity, preventing a change to the name and a loss of identity. If the levir should refuse, the widow initiates a measure-for-measure loss of his name and identity, ritually insulting him so that “his name will be called in Israel ‘the house of

32. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 232.

the unsandaled one.””

Postscript

The descriptive task of the literary approach readily lends itself to holistic, synchronic readings. The Pentateuch moves toward stabilized identity. The early and unsettled figures of Genesis are malleable; God transforms them to perpetuate the divine promise. When Israel becomes a nation in its numbers, a human king threatens that promise by attempting to control Israel’s identity. Now God must become a king above kings, transforming in name, body, and occupation to exercise great power through the exodus. For a wandering people, identity transformation is fitting and necessary; once ready to possess the promised land, identity must be fixed, the requirements for group membership carefully maintained.³³ The many transformations of Israel’s long history had as their goal one people of one mind, in service of one God,³⁴ dwelling undisturbed in one land. The power of God effects the fulfillment of the promise, which is the preservation of identity.

From a historical-critical perspective, there are divergent attitudes toward identity transformation in the pentateuchal sources. In non-Deuteronomic texts, identity appears to be more fluid, and its transformation is a positive change from self to (new) self. Although J and E are sometimes notoriously difficult to distinguish, J, E, and P may each describe a human being undergoing a transformation in name, body, and occupation.³⁵ Only E and P relate God’s name

33. See Deut 11.31–31: “For you are about to cross the Jordan to enter and possess the land that the LORD your God is assigning to you. When you have occupied it and are settled in it, take care to observe all the laws and rules that I have set before you this day” (*NJPS*).

34. Stephen A. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 32.

35. The transformations of the first two humans in Genesis 2–3 belong to J. The transformations of Abram and Sarai in Genesis 17 belong to P. The transformation of Jacob in Genesis 32 may belong to E (though often attributed to J); see Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:51, and Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, 86.

change, but J agrees with them on the quality of God's body in the exodus.³⁶ The non-Deuteronomic sources exhibit the shifting focus in identity transformation from Genesis to Exodus—Numbers. For J and E, we might surmise that the positive view of identity transformation reflects their penchant for dynamic narrative,³⁷ or that it serves the theological purposes of the redactor.³⁸ In P, positive identity transformation is consonant with the constant processes of “becoming” in priestly thought, in both the complex system of purity,³⁹ and the directive to attain holiness.⁴⁰ But the commonalities between J, E, and P may suggest that explanations of identity transformation peculiar to each non-Deuteronomic source are unnecessary.

D's attitude toward identity transformation accords with the main theme of the work and the movement it represents: unity.⁴¹ The radical covenant faith that D prescribes demands from every Israelite total devotion to Yhwh, a “unity of the self.”⁴² This unity is projected onto God: “Yhwh our God, Yhwh is one” (Deut 6.4). The *shema* is an argument against the fluidity of God's identity.⁴³ In firmly fixing identity, D inaugurates “the first stage of Israelite religion that proclaimed unequivocal monotheism, but only in relation to, and in tension with, the concept of the unitary individual.”⁴⁴ D compounds Israel's unity in its peculiar theology of history, whereby all generations of Israel are present at Horeb (4.9; 5.3–4, 20; 11.7; 29.13–14). This establishes an

36. In J, God's bodily transformation is more dramatic, since Genesis 18 belongs to this source.

37. See Rofé, *Introduction*, 212–3.

38. See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 13–43.

39. In which people and objects vacillate between pure, impure, sacred, and profane (see Leviticus 11–15). These transitions do not constitute identity transformations according to our criteria, but the fluidity of status is suggestive.

40. “You will be holy,” repeated throughout the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26). See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 225–32.

41. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 32.

42. Stephen A. Geller, “The God of the Covenant,” in *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*, ed. Barbara Nevling Porter (Bethesda, Md.: 2000), 295.

43. Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 67–8, 220–2. In precluding multiple manifestations of Yhwh in sundry locations, the *shema* is also an argument against the transformation of God's body.

44. Geller, “The God of the Covenant,” 296.

eternal continuity between God and Israel, but also starkly precludes identity transformation; if every generation is one, none can truly be new.

This paper represents a preliminary investigation into identity transformation. Tensions between and among the sources demand further study.⁴⁵ A more thorough examination in the disparate sources may yield insight into the development of the phenomenon and the ideologies of the Pentateuch's authors. Deeper literary analysis will enrich understanding of identity transformation as a major theme and an engine of exegesis. A variety and combination of methods will allow the biblical attitudes to enter dialog with communities (religious and socio-political) for whom these texts are scripture. Contemporary attitudes toward conversion, renaming, naturalization, or gender transition can constructively converse with Pentateuchal attitudes toward identity transformation.

45. Tensions include the Priestly penalty of *karet* as a potential negative transformation, the Deuteronomic doctrine of repentance as a potential positive transformation, non-Israelite entrance into the Israelite community as transformation, and human versus divine agency in determining and transforming identity.

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