

The Number of Israel in D'varim (Deuteronomy)

"Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made.

He says not, 'And to seeds', as of many; but as of one, 'And to thy Seed', Who is Christ." (Galatians 3.16)

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The Number of Israel in D'varim (Deuteronomy)

[We have seen how in Deuteronomy 6](#), the number of the pronouns used for Israel illuminate the passage and help both emphasise and elucidate its meaning. This context is like a delicate watercolour painting, not usually a sharp pastel, that overrides other direct objects, but a shade that provides nuance and insight to the immediate sense of the text.

When the Apostle describes the number of the Seed of Abraham in Gal.3.16, it seems like an abstruse grammatical point is being stretched to draw a spiritual lesson. Brief reflection on the comparison of the singular and plural in Genesis 17.7, 9 and 10-11 with the exclusive use of the singular in 22.16-17, in a sense that extends way above Isaac's personal destiny, indicate this is indeed neither an incidental nor casual observation. When Moses is first commissioned to call Israel's people, in Exodus 3.14 and following, he as God's representative, as [Joshua and the Judges do](#) later, is to address them in *plural*. Yet when Moses first reasons with Pharaoh, he describes Israel as one man, and uses the singular, God's own firstborn, 4.22-23, as individual and unique as Pharaoh's own firstborn son. Is not this distinction the key to Israel's redemption? In Leviticus, almost all the commands in the first 9 chapters are singular, with few exceptions, except for congregational offerings, then with the catastrophic failure of the priesthood in ch.10, the number of the person addressed is overwhelmingly plural for two chapters, after which for five it is very largely individual, for priestly duties for specific circumstances, culminating in the Day of Atonement. In Numbers, Israel like Edom, is treated as one person, in ch.20 and in Balaam's prophecies, recalling Israel's great Progenitor, Jacob. Many other passages are plural, on offerings, on the Passover, in rebellion at Kadesh, in Joshua's appeal 14.8-9. A detailed examination of the interesting exceptions is required.

Number is structural to interpretation. It is integral to understanding the sense, though often so unobtrusive, its significance can easily be overlooked.

Divine Unity and the Unity of God's people are paralleled. This unity is reflected by the unity of the Divine Command. As we love God in His Unity, with all our diverse passions and parts, so we are drawn into a unity of thought, action and purpose, like His own, both individually but also corporately as individual assemblies and as His Bride. This reflects the dominant fivefold petition in the High Priestly prayer (Jn.17.11, 21a, 21b, 22, 23). As we shall see the same principles apply to Israel in Deuteronomy.

There are many other key areas of theological reflection upon which this observation impacts, which we begin to tentatively explore in the conclusion.

We have seen in [both Joshua and Judges](#), the mediator of God's Word, Joshua or the Judges, almost exclusively referred to Israel as plural. This theme characterises much of Deuteronomy, but it is interwoven with other important threads, which we will also examine briefly.

The significance of number in some passages of Deuteronomy is convoluted, and less easy to grasp, especially Deuteronomy 4, which acts as the prelude to the Ten Commandments, and Deuteronomy 11, following on from the catastrophic failures of chapter 10. They are especially convoluted as far as the number of the pronouns reflecting Israel is concerned. We will examine these chapters last to see the patterns of the use of number, and see some of the lessons embedded in other parts of the book that may be gleaned from them.

Chapters 1 to 3 – Preface

Right from the outset of this rehearsal of the history and Law of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, Israel is addressed in the plural. However, there are important hallmarks to indicate that this is not a casual practice, it is carefully designed to highlight future unity.

In 1v.8 and v.21, the imperative "see!" is singular, as though the whole nation beholds, as one man. In v.21, there are another 8 singular forms addressing Israel, 5 in total are imperative (2 more positive, arise and go, and 2 negative, do not fear or be dismayed), before Moses returns to the ubiquitous plural.

For beholding *brings* salvation, Ex.14.13, Num.21.8,9.

The third use of the word see in the singular, 1.31, is segue to another most singular address. "**Thou** hast seen how that the LORD **thy** God bore **thee**, as a man doth bear his son". The whole nation is treated as one person, or one person is treated as the whole nation, Hos.11.1.

In chapter 2.7, when describing the blessedness of Israel, Moses himself briefly reverts to the singular 6 times to depict the whole nation. The contrast with the beginning of the chapter is sharp, from 1.32 right through to 2.6, the plural address is used, starting with the dreadful words, '**ye** did not believe the LORD **your** God', at Kadesh Barnea, 1.35-6, and ending with the death of the last of the unfaithful generation by the crossing of Zered, 2.14, 38 years later, as Israel approaches Moab's territory. Then in v.8, turning now to the first person, he returns to the plural 4 times, to describe the passage around Esau's land.

In v.9, God addresses Moses singularly, but addresses matters of national ownership, not proper only to the Mediator personally, 'I will not give **thee** of their land *for* a possession'. Moses represents Israel, as Leader and Head. In v.12, Israel is again addressed as one individual, clearly not Jacob, for God speaks of taking possession of **his**, Israel's, land, which God has given to **them** (pl). It's possible this last phrase refers to the Edomites' possession of Seir, but it is not the natural reading. So, it seems **Moses** is treated as **Israel**, and **Israel** is treated as **Moses**.

This recurs in v.18, 'the LORD spake unto me, saying, **Thou** art to pass over through Ar'. It is not just Moses who passes, but the Leader stands for the whole nation. Again in v.19, 4 times the singular is addressed to Moses, but the instructions apply to the whole nation, 'I will not give **thee** of the land of the children of Ammon *any* possession'. Moses is viewed as **Israel**, and Israel is viewed through and in Moses' headship.

A triple Divine command to arise and cross the river Arnon, in v.24, transitions to the singular, again starting with the imperative 'behold', with 8 succeeding singular references to Moses, or Israel, or rather both united, with Mediator as head. Moses personally commands emissaries in v.25, and his words to Sihon are from one person to one person, but Moses represents the whole of Israel, 'Let **me** pass through **thy** land', just as Sihon stands for the whole nation he leads. This singular representation continues 12 times until v.29. Then this headship is broken by the river Jordan. The last time reads, 'I shall pass over Jordan into the land which the LORD **our** God gives **us**.'

As the end of his headship approaches, Moses refers to Israel as 'us', then unusually *he* refers to the whole nation as one man, 'that He might deliver him into **thy** hand,' v.30.

The Lord then, v.31, addresses Moses, and Sihon, as heads, 'I have begun to give Sihon and his land before **thee**: begin to possess, that **thou** may inherit his land.' Moses, of course, has no personal interest East of Jordan. The singular is used 4 times of *Israel*, even though Moses writes first, 'the LORD said unto **me**'.

Up to v.36, all the 13 forms of reference to Israel are then plural, but in the first person.

Then in v.37, Moses first addresses Israel as singular, '**thou** came not', as they approach the border of Jabbok, and concludes the chapter with a fourteenth plural 'the LORD our God forbad **us**'.

Chapter 3 begins in the same vein with three 1st person plurals. Then in v.2, like 2.31, God's address to Moses himself, is recounted, but the four singular encouragements apply to the whole nation. He again is head, Israel is the body.

A series of 11 'we' and 'us' references is broken in v.12. Moses gives the conquered territory to Reuben and Gad, as in vv.13,15,16, also to Manasseh.

From v.18 to 20, Moses reverts to the usual pattern of addressing the people, here the three individual tribes, as plural 17 times.

An important transition

Now Joshua is commanded to lead the people, v.21, his eyes see, he will cross Jordan, plainly not alone, but the command is mingled with 4 plural references to the people, twice, for example, your (pl) God. Here are hallmarks of the newly appointed Head.

A plea rejected

Moses' plaintive request to enter is firmly rejected, but he is granted the consolation of sight, vv.23-27.

Joshua is confirmed, comforted and encouraged by Moses, v.28, he will lead, he will apportion, the land which the nation sees (s). We encamp, v.29.

So far, we have seen the singular addresses used of Israel employed for:

1. Whole nation treated as one collective, e.g.2.30,37.
2. Nation treated as one progenitor, Jacob, Abraham, Adam, e.g. 2.12.
3. Leader identified with whole nation, Moses or Sihon e.g. 2.24.
4. The whole nation identified with its Head, e.g. 2.31, 3.2.

Chapter 5 – The heart of the Covenant

Here is the revelation of the Covenant, written by the Divine finger, directly to Israel. From a grammatical perspective, this chapter is simple and binary. All the commands directly addressed to Israel are singular within the Decalogue, beginning in v.6, all the addresses and exhortations outside are plural, with very few exceptions, like the imperative 'hear' in v.1.

There are three reasons for this singular address.

- The whole nation is addressed as one man, as in the initial command to hear.
- Each individual is addressed, since keeping the covenant is his entire responsibility, e.g. not to covet **thy** neighbour's wife, **thy** neighbour's house, etc.
- A deeper reason, connected to real headship of the people.

The generic observation, God speaks with mankind and he (s) lives, in v.21, and the reference to the words of *this* people (s), in v.25, is followed by 'they spoke' (twice) are also exceptional, but, not direct addresses, consisting of the people's observation and Moses' report of God's speech to him. There is a third interesting exception, to which we return.

A closer examination also reveals some other interesting details. The Sinaitic Covenant is distinct and separate from the covenant with Abraham and the patriarchs, v.3. The unity and singleness of the person or nation addressed is shattered by disobedience, v.9, those who hate Me, both fathers and their progeny. The unity of the thousands that love Him, is restored ostensibly by keeping a singular command (kethiv¹, not qere, v.10, as Num.15.31).²

Moses is presented as a model mediator, v.5, and in v.24-5 and v.27-8. However, as we have seen in 3.23-29, Moses has already been barred from the Promised Land, and his mediation must shortly end.

The third exception to universal plurals outside the Decalogue is, 'Who (s) will give (s) them, that there might be such a heart (s) in them', v.26. **One** unified heart, **one** gift, **one** Giver.

Chapters 29-31 – A new Covenant

Chapter 29 in English texts, 28.69 in Hebrew, starts portentously, 'These are words of the covenant YHWH commanded Moses to cut with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, **beside** the covenant He had cut with them in Horeb'. Here is the covenant which secures true circumcision of the heart, 30.6, a wholehearted return to the Lord, and the strong desire to obey His law, 30.8-10. It is alluded to and distinguished from the Covenant of works by the Apostle in Rom.10.5-8. The word of Deut.30.14, is the

¹ Kethiv refers to the written Masoretic manuscript, Qere to the way on which the words are pronounced by readers. Both have authority as to the original sense and meaning.

² There are changes too from the Exodus version, but these have little to do with number, except for the number of the command (kethiv) in v.10 in Deuteronomy, (and the person of the pronominal suffix, from first to third in Deut.).

Messiah, Whose command in Deut.30.11, brings a recall from spiritual exile, 30.4, whether still in literal exile, 30.1-3, or *in the Land*, 30.16-19.

This covenant is applied even to the stranger, the hewer of wood and the drawer of water, 29.11-12. Thus, he preempts Joshua's inadvertent covenant with the uncircumcised Gibeonites, Josh.9.15, 21, Ezek.32.30, who dwelt within Israel's gate, Jos.9.22,27;10.7, 2 Sam.21.1-2.

It is striking that at this very juncture, the narration changes *from plural to singular* in v.11-13.

That He may *establish thee*, v.13. What is this but a preemption of Jer.31.31, Ezek.39.23-29, 37.21-28 and of course, Hebrews 8.8-13?

In 2014, [in responding to Yisroel Blumenthal's critique of Michael Brown's](#), "Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus", I wrote, 'Here is the basis for Israel's return to and enjoyment of her land, in a state of imperfect obedience. It is noteworthy that much of Deut. 30 is addressed in the singular second person, as to Israel *embodied by one representative*. This present reign of the Jewish King and His righteousness is the ground on which Israel has been returned to her land, in a state of impenitence and unbelief.' It is to help explore this theme in more detail that I have returned to this text.

Chapters 32-34 – The Song and future expectation

The song of lament over Israel's forthcoming apostasy is not as hopeless or as severe as it seems. There is much to indicate [hidden mercy](#), beginning at the end in v.43, but in other references scattered throughout the song that point to the Divine Atonement, like vv.36, 39-40, 42, 21 (reminiscent of Rom.11.11-12) and even v.35 (Who will repay? Ps.69.4) and the mysterious v.5, which alludes to the removal of the blemish of His wayward sons.³ However, as disobedience follows blessing and ingratitude, with complacency, the hitherto universal singular used of Israel, as one, splinters, first in the apocopated vowel of the two verbs in v.16, then in the fuller consonantal plural forms in the following verses, as new gods multiply, so does schism. Whilst the horror of the new unity of the nation *in rebellion*, as at the golden calf, is underscored, there is a short reversion to two singulars in v.18, '**thou** art unmindful', '**thou** hast forgotten' the Begetter of thy unity.

In the tribal blessings in Deuteronomy 33, Moses comes closest of all mediators to the Messiah, he is named a *king* in Jeshurun, v.5, the *priest* who interceded for the High Priest, 9.20, and the unique *Prophet*, who sets the bar for Christ alone to leap over, Num.12.8, Deut.18.15-8 and 34.10.

Astonishingly, Simeon is excised, perhaps reflecting their major role in the Moabite apostasy, Num.25. At their conclusion, Israel, addressed again as Jeshurun become as one man, the sole recipient of God's blessing and favour, v.26-29.

Joshua, the Lord's namesake, takes up the mantle of the Mediator in Deut.34. He succeeds where Moses fails, in bringing Israel into Canaan.

³ The difficulty of the Hebrew sense of this verse is attested to by the multiplicity of very different translations, the confusion of subject and object, the strange Maqqeph (Hebrew hyphen) found between the first and second clause in some texts, linking them and the eccentric ending of the previous verse with a standalone pronoun, which is unique in the Song and the chapter.

Chapter 6 - The key command

(This section reiterates the [cited work](#))

There is striking parallel between Divine Unity and national unity in Deuteronomy 6. The chapter, which succeeds the ten commandments, starts with a general exhortation, like those at the end of the preceding chapter to all the people of Israel, v.1. All the pronouns and the verb pertaining to Israel are plural (two pronominal suffixes, one pronoun and one verbal participle, in Hebrew).

In v.2, there is a complete shift to the singular (one verb, six pronominal suffixes and one pronoun). Why? Perhaps it suggests a particular focus on the individual responsibility of each hearer?

In v.3, there is a shift from singular (three times, two verbs and one pronominal suffix) to plural (one verb, to multiply greatly), and then back to the singular again (two pronominal suffixes). The context suggests a national identification as one person, which is emphasised by the use of the plural form for multiplying.

By v.4, this impression is strongly confirmed by that most famous confession, the Shema'. The imperative, 'hear', to the whole nation as one man, is singular, the description of our God, involves a plural pronominal suffix. Our God makes us one people. The greatest of all commands, the heart of all the Law, is all in the singular, v.5 (four pronominal suffixes, including this time the one attached to God's title and one verb). A unifying affection is manifest. For the next eight verses, 34 singular expressions are used consecutively. Is this coincidence?

In v.14, suddenly this harmony and unity is shattered by the introduction of polytheism. Two plural forms occur abruptly (a noun and a pronominal suffix). A multiplicity of gods splinters Israel into factions and parties. v.15, a reminder of God's true nature and Name, restores the singular forms (all of which are pronominal suffixes on the receiving end of God's fury), including the mistranslated 'you', which should strictly be **'thee'**.

In v.16, the reminder of Massah and the active tempting of God, fractures Israel into individuals or parties again (three plurals: two active verbs and one pronominal suffix).

In v.17, the remembrance of and return to God's law, sees a transition from plural back to singular (a plural verb and pronominal suffix, to a singular pronominal suffix).

From v.18 to v.20, the next 9 consecutive forms are singular (6 pronominal suffixes and 3 active verbs). The chapter concludes with a description to an enquiring son, with a lesson in God's dealings with 'us', after his enquiry about 'you' (pl.) and 'our' God. The instructor is singular, v.21, the nation is now treated as plural 14 times, but only in the first, now not the second person.

There is also an interesting parallel with the singular and plural for the word command (mizvah), which is uncharacteristically unclear in the AV translation. In 5.29 (v.26 in Hebrew text) the word is plural, but in 5.31 (v.28 in Hebrew), 6.1, and again later in 6.25, despite the words for statutes and judgements always being plural, the word for command is singular each time. In 6.2, after the transition from plural to singular for Israel, the word command reverts to the plural (as it always is in the AV). It hints at an emphasis on the uniqueness of the great command in 6.4, as the great undergirding singular command,

and perhaps hints too at a relationship between the unity of the heart in the unity of grasp of the law, something also highlighted in Ps.19.9 (v.10 in Hebrew) and Ps.86.11. In Hebrew, as in Arabic, the word for unite is a cognate of the first numeral, leading to interesting paradoxes like Gen.11.1, where the Hebrew for 'one' is a plural adjective. When Israel falls to polytheism, like picking up the shards of a broken vessel, the word for commands is again plural in v.17, along with the pronominal suffix for God. As restoration of the relationship is envisaged and obedience is restored, the singular for command is once more used in v.25 as the passage concludes.

There is a still more intriguing parallel with the Unity of Deity. We are familiar with the Council of Deity passages, in which God calls upon His Counsel, indicating relational plurality within the Godhead, Gen.1.26; 3.22; 11.7; Ps.89.1-5; 110.1; Isa.6.8; Tit.1.2; Rev.13.8. During the transition of the description of the people from plural to singular, at the threshold of receiving the greatest command, is the Shema', v.4. The Divine title Elohim is a plural form. [The Divine Name YHVH](#) is the singular 3rd person, in causative form, for to be. So the Shema' is: Hear (s) O Israel, YHVH (s) our (pl) God (pl) is One (s) YHVH (s): SSPPSS. By the next verse, the greatest commandment, the heart of all commands, there are 5 singulars for Israel. And thou (s) shalt love the LORD thy (s) God with all thine (s) heart, and with all thy (s)soul, and with all thy (s) might.

Loving the Divine Unity unifies Israel. It is impossible to love one aspect or character of God truly, without loving Him all, as we worship Him in His fullness, by His Word, and His Holy Spirit, He unites us within and amongst ourselves.

There is an echo here of the High Priestly prayer, especially Jn.17.23.

Chapters 7-28 – Expositing Sinai's Covenant and its fatal flaws

Polytheism results in schism.

Repeatedly we observe the same shattering of Israel's unity by polytheism. Worshipping other gods splinters the people into their personal preferences for baser excellences than the Sublime Unity of the God of Israel.

We see this in 7.1-4, 18 consecutive singular expressions are smashed by slaving (plural) to other gods in v.4. The destruction of the whole nation is unitary and complete (destroy **thee**) but all the other expressions are now plural. How singular unity is recovered we will explore, but again there is an echo of the plural in v.25 in burning the idols.

In 8.19-20, the pursuit of other deities in forgetfulness of their Patron and Governor, will result in 6 consecutive plurals after a long string of singular references to Israel. The earlier 6 plurals in the opening verse of the chapter seem to serve a different contrast, to be examined later.

In 9.7, at the exact point of rehearsing the great rebellion, there is an emphatic inflexion from single, at the beginning of the chapter hitherto, to plural, which is maintained while Moses is addressed and pleads for them, though now in the 3rd person, rather than the second.

After restoring Israel to a singular, from 10.9, he yet describes Israel to God as plural four times. The need for circumcision of heart (Phil.3.3, Col.2.11), and their residual hardness prompts a return to the plural 4 times, in v.16, and a reminder of their lost estate in Egypt as strangers twice in v.19.

We see the same phenomenon of splintering under polytheism in 11.16-18, though the pattern in the chapter is complex, and receives separate focus below, there's a hint of it too in 10.16, where the command to circumcise the heart and not be hard hearted is expressed in four plurals, following a series of 9 singulars before, then the reminder that Israel's God is the God of gods and Lord of lords, singular, awesome, incorruptible and supreme, in v.17.

Most of the prohibitions and precautions about polytheism in chapter 12 are couched in the plural, 10 in v.2-4 for example. Although a passage at the end of the chapter about the accursedness of domestic idolatry is all singular, 9 times, perhaps this underscores each person's and each family's responsibility.

In chapter 13, the rising of a false prophet in v.2 is to a nation in singular, he gives a sign to **thee**, of which he speaks to **thee**. His claim is '**we** should go' after other gods, then the plural is introduced, **ye** have not known, **ye** have not served. The imperative to not hear is *singular*, v.3, perhaps underscoring each single hearer's duty, then *all* that follows is plural, 16 times in succession.

When a close family member defects to idolatry and seduces others, v.7, all at first is in the singular, 8 times. The seducer invites 'let us' go, 'let us' serve, though the person commanded remains singular 15 times, even the suffix for fathers is '**thine**'. The only exceptions are the nations around **you**, v.8, suggesting a wavering at such overwhelming external influence, and slaves, at the end of v.11, recalling the dark days of Egypt. The reaction of surrounding Israel to resolute action is thrice plural, v.12, at horror at what might have been, with a restoration of the Hebrew singular **thee** at the end of the episode (a nuance not captured in the AV, being drawn by the influence of three preceding plurals in the verse).

When an apostate town arises to seduce Israel to other gods, v.13, 3 singulars describe what is given to the nation, not a family or person. The seducers are plural, the gods are plural and the inhabitants are plural, though they have risen from within **thee**, v.14. The national duty to faithfully ascertain the facts of this abomination are four times in the singular, v.15. The complete destruction and permanent desolation of the city, like Jericho or Gibeah, with all its inhabitants, and the blessings that ensue are enjoined in 14 singulars till the end of the chapter.

Three clear examples represent the emphatic use of plurals and singulars to illustrate the effects of polytheism and its denial and resolute rejection.

Chapter 14 prohibits pagan practices like cutting flesh and making bald during bereavement in the plural, 5 times. Israel's choice position as a special treasure (*segulah*) is underscored by the singular 4 times. The dietary rules, abolished as emblematic of something deeper, namely the guarding of the inward soul, in Acts 10, follow in the plural.

Chapter 15 and 16 are singular, focusing on the year of release, the festival of Passover and the appointment of officers. All are national affairs.

In chapter 17, almost all the text is singular. The instigators of idolatry in v.3, are briefly referred to in 3 plurals at the end of v.5, even though they appear as individuals. The king's anticipated folly in descending to Egypt for horses and chariots, the home of idolatry, brings a double warning of the dangers in the plural to Israel, v.16.

The only hint of a slip into the plural in chapter 18, in response to the worship of other gods, is in v.21, when Israel's evaluation of an enticing false prophet is considered, 'how shall **we** know?' Only once does the first person plural arise here. There is more to this chapter, considered below.

In chapter 20, there are a few other plurals for Israel, we shall explore, but the in the destruction of the people of Canaan the narrative quickly turns from a customary single address to plural, 20.18, when the possibility of imitation of their abominations and idols is considered, followed by an immediate reversion to the singular in describing obedience.

The most emphatic display of a plural address arising from polytheistic rebellion is in the long series of curses found in chapter 28. Almost the whole passage is couched in the **singular**, and the reader familiar with its denunciations of and warnings against impenitence in sin will know its climactic character. In verse 14, as the slide begins, there is one brief foray into the plural, 'do not thou stray from all the words, which I have commanded **you** today to the left or right, to go after **other gods**, to serve them'. In 62, after a long string of warnings, the Lord warns he will destroy '**thee**', v.61, and '**you** will remain a few mortals, whereas **you** were like the stars of heaven for multitude', a brief reminder of the sharp numerical contrast, before again reverting to the singular, 'for **thou** has not hearkened to the voice of YHVH **thy** God'. Then the collective ruin is underscored, 'And as YHVH delighted in **you**, to do **you** good, and to multiply **you**, so YHVH will be pleased to ruin **you** and to destroy **you**, and **you** will be uprooted from the land into which **thou** now enter to inherit it' v.63. The contrast is clear. The singular form of address is reverted to until the most appalling finale, by reference to the Red Sea redemption from the home of idols, in v. 68. 'YHVH will return **thee** to Egypt, in ships, by the way I said to **thee**, **thou** shall no more see her. Then **you** will sell **yourselves** there to thine enemies, for slaves and slave girls, and there will be no buyer.'

Other forms of rebellion

Other specific forms of violation of the Law Covenant, apart from idolatry, also cause a lapse into the plural address. Addressing them with strict punishment restores unity.

In 21.21, the rebellious and stubborn son brought by his parents to the elders, is to be stoned by the whole community, as a plurality, thus '**thou** shall remove the evil from **thy** midst', suggesting union is restored by the destruction of a dangerous influence.

In 22.24, if a betrothed virgin is found lying with another man in the city, '**you** shall bring both of them to the gate and **you** shall stone them... and **thou** shall remove the evil from **thy** midst'. The same occurs in v.21, with the maid who cannot prove her virginity at marriage, 'the men of the city shall stone **her**'...'and **thou** shall remove the evil from **thy** midst'. There is no recorded instance, in the whole history of Israel, of these laws being effected, and there are many examples, where they are not, suggesting the penalty had fallen into disuse.

So punishing sin, eradicates it from the congregation and unites the nation.

Redemption unites (like punishment).

More intriguing than what shatters Israel, is what unites the nation.

In 7.8, for example, redemption draws seven successive plurals to a close, and 'He redeems **thee**' introduces a pearl of singular addresses to match the segulah, the peculiar treasure, the Lord has introduced as Israel's description in v.6. The transition is not apparent in the English of the AV.

In 13.6, one word transforms two plurals into a long series of singular addresses, 'He redeemed **thee**'.

In 21.6, the elders' plural confession, laying the guilt upon and sacrifice of the heifer, also brings to remembrance God's redemption, with atoning blood. The conclusion in v.9 is, '**thou** shall extirpate the blood [guilt] of the innocent from **thy** midst, for **thou** do right in the eyes of YHVH.'

Two other references to redemption are embedded in passages filled with singular addresses, with no transition, 15.15 and 24.18, this too carries some significance since often references that hark back to Egypt split into the plural.

The Stranger

We noted before how in ch.29.11-13, the stranger is the juncture for a return from the plural to the singular address for Israel, as though a sojourner or outsider plays a key role.

In 14.4-21 a long succession of plural addresses concludes with the mention of the stranger in **thy** gates, for a return to the single address. The passage focuses on dietary restrictions, the very barrier established in Lev.11 to establish a strict fence between Israel and the Gentiles, Lev.11.45. This barrier is removed in Acts 10-11, by Peter's vision, at the visit of Gentile Cornelius. There is a chain of 44 singular addresses afterward till the end of the chapter. The transition is also linked in 14.21 by a passing prohibition to boiling a kid in its mother's milk, often considered a foundational principle for kashrut laws.

Egypt

Many passages that allude to the bondage in Egypt refer to Israel in the plural, as though the nation was then disunited and split.

In 23.5, (v.4 in Hebrew) Israel was not met, and came out of Egypt as a plural people, however Balaam was hired against him, to curse him, as one nation, in the singular.

At 24.9, Israel singular is exhorted to remember how the Lord **thy** God dealt with Miriam, but the reference to the exodus invokes a plural **you**. The text then returns to the singular.

The description of Amalek's treacherous assault in 25.17, starts with two singulars, Remember (s) and what he did to **thee**, but the ascent from Egypt is when **you** came out. Again, the text then reverts to the singular.

In 26.3, the reference to **our** fathers and to give the land to **us**, breaks back into singular references. In v.6-9, the narrative of Egypt's severe mistreatment and Israel's exodus lapses into 12 consecutive plurals. The entrance in Canaan in v.10 introduces the return of a singular use for Israel, perhaps due to individual duty.

There appears to be a consistent pattern, with the exceptions noted above, under Redemption. The link between Israel himself being a stranger and being in scattered exile in Egypt is marked by 10.19, 'for **ye** were strangers in the land of Egypt'.

The Mediator

As we saw in the preface, when Moses speaks for Israel to Sihon, King of the Amorites, in 2.27, he speaks as one man to one man. However, the two heads are acting for their whole nations.

'Let **me** pass through **thy** land: I will go along by the high way, I will neither turn unto the right hand nor to the left. **Thou** shalt sell **me** meat for money, that I may eat; and give **me** water for money, that I may drink: only I will pass through on my feet'.

Though there is no recorded dialogue, the same single headship is evident in 2.9, 19 and 25, as the LORD addresses Moses on behalf of all Israel. The same rule is *not* applied in 2.2-3-6, whilst the generation of the warriors of Kadesh Barnea, who rejected the mediator's double plea, still live, until the last one perishes by the crossing of Zered into Moabite territory, 2.14.

By 3.21, Joshua is addressed by Moses as the new mediator, 'so shall the LORD do unto all the kingdoms whither **thou** pass', though there are still 4 plural addresses for Israel in 3.21-2. His headship is still nascent.

In 18.15, the promise of Moses' greater Successor is reiterated explicitly:

'The LORD **thy** God will raise up unto **thee** a Prophet from the midst of **thee**, of **thy** brethren, like unto me; unto **Him ye** shall hearken.' Four single addresses to Israel reiterate the unity of the party to be represented, the people, but the mediatorship returns the single to a final plural, like a prism splitting light into constituent rays. The next verse returns to the singular, but is highly distinctive in narrating **a first person single** report from Israel, 'According to all that **thou** desired of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, "Let **me** not hear again the voice of the LORD **my** God, neither let **me** see this great fire any more, that I die not.'"

The original recounting in Exodus was plural, Ex.20.19 (20.16 in Hebrew versification), 'Speak thou with **us**, and **we** will hear: but let not God speak with **us**, lest **we** die.'

The same is true in Deut.5.25 (5.22 in Hebrew), 'Now therefore why should **we** die? for this great fire will consume **us**: if **we** hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then **we** shall die.'

Then the parallel between the Mediator, drawn from Israel, for Israel, and Moses is drawn:

'And the LORD said unto me, **They** have well *spoken that* which **they** have spoken.

I will raise **them** up a Prophet from among **their** brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto **them** all that I shall command Him.' Deut.18.17-18

The contrast between the people and the Mediator, on the one hand, and Moses on the other, is accentuated by the plural. Yet, the very introduction of this mediation unifies the nation, as though one Individual.

The Priest

When the priest approaches the people before war, he calls, 'Hear (s), O Israel', 'Let not your (pl) heart (s) be faint', though the rest of the address is plural. Deut.20.3

As the priests or Levites instruct Israel about how to handle leprosy cases, a single imperative 'take **thou** heed' gives way to two plural addresses, 'all that the priests the Levites shall teach **you**: as I commanded them, so **you** shall observe to do.' 24.8 The text then returns to the singular address. Explicit reference to instruction from mediators of Divine Law often seems to refract the nation into multiple individuals.

The instruction to an individual judge in Deut.17.9, when faced with a difficult case, and advised to consult the priests, remains in the singular.

Again, there's a hint of this change from a singular entity to a collective one in 26.3, 'I am come unto the country which the LORD swore unto **our** fathers for to give **us**.' Then again there is a return to the singular, as the individual fulfils his duty.

A similar phenomenon occurs, when Moses and the elders address the people in 27.1, a singular imperative is followed by plurals 'Keep (s) all the commandments which I command **you** this day.' A single plural follows.

Crossing Jordan

27.2 seems to reflect a different pattern, after Moses' death and the people passing over Jordan, 12 successive singular forms describe Israel. Here it seems is a transformative milestone.

26.10 too has already been noted.

The Altar

27.4 the transition from plural to singular here is also marked by the construction of the altar in Mt Ebal, 'when **ye** be gone over Jordan, *that ye* shall set up these stones, which I command **you** this day, in

mount Ebal, and **thou** shalt plaster them with plaster. And there shalt **thou** build an altar unto the LORD **thy** God, an altar of stones: **thou** shalt not lift up *any iron tool* upon them.' 9 successive singulars follow this event.

27.9, Moses, the priests and the Levites command the people, but following the altar description there are a further 8 successive *singular* references to Israel.

Sowing Seed

In Deut.11.10, the literal sowing of seed in a field marks a reversion to the singular, 'For the land, whither thou go in to possess it, *is* not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowed thy seed, and watered *it* with thy foot, as a garden of herbs:'.

Other agricultural activities similarly evoke the singular, 11.14-5, as 6.11, although see below for other reasons for this shift.

Chapter 4 – A tapestry of 22 threads

There are 22 inflexions from single to plural or plural to singular. It helps summarise some of the findings above, which repeat the same observations described.

Two charts will help survey this. [The first maps](#) the uses of the descriptions for Israel, by number only, it shows the patterns, at a glance, (please bear in mind it reflects the Hebrew, not the English translation, which sometimes substitutes a single for a plural for ease of reading, especially when the immediate context contains the same number). [The second maps](#) the part of speech involved as well as the number, whether suffix or pronoun or verb, etc.

After a signature imperative in the singular, Hear! Moses appeals to Israel in the plural to hearken to Gods commands as they enter Canaan, warning them nether to add nor detract from the whole.

In v.3 when an individual transgressor violates God's will and is destroyed, the judgement transiently brings Israel into a unity, as **thy** God destroys the evil from **thy** midst.

Eight plural expressions return in the next verse, punctuated by the single imperative 'Behold'. This is the usual form of address of a mediator In later books.

Four plurals follow, until the onlooking Gentiles notice the wisdom and understanding of God's nation, with 9 singulars. Curiously, the adjective for God's nearness is plural, in v.7, distinguishing the activities and attributes of the God Who keeps them, contrasting this with newfound unity of the people, then the compound nature of worship and prayer is emphasised by a switch to two first person plurals, Moses and the people, 'the LORD **our** God upon Whom **we** call', as if to underscore the intertwining of the two realities. In v.8, we have a similar dance of the numbers, the nation is three times exhorted in the singular, the Word of God is described in 3 plural expressions, summarised in 2 singular ones, the nation

in conclusion is addressed in the plural: SSSPPP(SS)SSP⁴, with the two references to Moses in the parenthesis. Again, there is a hint from the interchange, that the unity and the diversity of the Law both harbour and nourish the unity in diversity of the nation.

As if to reinforce this, the next verse immediately reverts to the singular, whilst addressing the whole nation, 'Only take heed to **thyself**, and keep **thy** soul diligently, lest **thou** forget the things which **thine** eyes have seen'. Is this an address to each individual alone? Does this reflect an emphasis on personal responsibility? The succeeding verse, v.10 suggests otherwise, 'the day that **thou** stood before the LORD **thy** God in Horeb.' For whilst individual responsibility is primary to national success, many hearing Moses words now, nearly 40 years after the events, would *never* have seen that scene, *directly* heard the solemn charge, or stood before Horeb *at that time*. This is a national appeal, not just a personal one. It is as though the nation was one wayward man. There are two other strong hints of this: first the words are plural, the Law is composite and entire, but composed of many precepts; second three successive nouns are employed to indicate this, **thine** eyes, two eyes but one beholder, perhaps millions of eyes are really in mind, but one beholder, **thy** life, the Hebrew noun being plural but having a singular meaning and a singular suffix, and most telling of all, **thine** heart. In English this seems to make a weak case, but in Hebrew the singular noun often stands for a collective of hearts, see Num.15.39, Deut.10.16; 11.13,16,18; 13.4 for examples with a plural suffix your heart(s)⁵ or Deut.7.17; 8.2,5,14,17 for examples with a singular pronominal suffix, **thy** heart, but an unambiguously plural subject (the whole nation spoken of as one person). So there is in this verse, eyes (pl), a heart (s) and life (pl in Hebrew), all suffixed with singular pronoun endings. Then there is another reference in the same verse, to a plurality that springs from one, **thou** shall 'teach them **thy** sons, and **thy** sons' sons'.

In v.10, as Moses is commanded to address the people, the narrative returns to the plural: one mediator, a multiplicity of individuals represented. Now, in v.11, the wording about Sinai is plural, '**ye** came near and stood under the mountain'. Down to verse 18, in four distinct verses they are warned about idols and images, the narrative remains plural.

In v.19, in considering the worship of heavenly bodies, the sun, stars and moon, for one verse the address becomes singular, seven times. I find this difficult to explain, perhaps the primary emphasis is on each individual's responsibility and danger, the adoration of these objects often beginning privately. Perhaps too, it strikes a deliberate contrast with the plural of the next verse.

In v.20, the enslaved and divided state in Egypt, as we saw above, in the 'iron furnace' marks a return to the plural, from which God delivered them. After their representative, Moses, is barred on behalf of their sin, as well as his own, for two expressions, almost like the effect of an atonement, the nation is referred to in the singular, 'the LORD **thy** God giveth **thee** for an inheritance', v.21. This is transient and the plural is restored immediately, '**ye** shall go over, and possess', v.22.

The plural continues 7 times, with a fifth warning about fashioning an image for worship, in v.23, then switches to the singular with an appeal to the whole nation to remind them of the first to third

⁴ S = single form of word P= plural.

⁵ A similar phenomenon occurs in 11.24, 'Every place whereon the soles of **your** feet' is actually 'foot' in Hebrew.

commandments, which are about to be reiterated, ‘the LORD **thy** God hath forbidden **thee**.’ As a husband to his bride, He appeals, ‘For the LORD **thy** God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God’, v.24.

The singular persists in v.25, ‘**thou** shalt beget’, but as Israel multiplies, corruption comes both with numbers and with complacency, ‘**ye** shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt **yourselves**’. The first mark of this complacency, with the return to four plurals is **you** (p) shall ‘make a graven image, or the likeness of any thing’. However the offence is paid to ‘**thy** God, to provoke Him to anger’. Perhaps this underscores the bride’s adultery against her Divine Groom.

The plural continues in v.26, ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against **you** this day, that **ye** shall soon utterly perish’.

11 consecutive plurals follow as Israel is scattered to foreign lands and must serve **gods**, that neither see, nor hear, nor digest, not smell.

Then in humiliation, Israel seeks her true God, the Hebrew for the seeking is plural, but ‘the LORD **thy** God’ is sought, the AV, being forced by the strange grammar, places the whole expression in the singular. ***This strange and forced switch in number is another pronounced display of the unifying effect of turning back to God.*** The point is reinforced by **18** consecutive singular expressions addressing Israel, ‘**thy** God, **thou** shalt find him, if **thou** seek him with all **thy** heart and with all **thy** soul.’

The whole of the remainder of the chapter, till Moses’ description of the allocation of the refugee cities in v.41, which does not involve an address to Israel, is all in the singular, a further **26** times, with one telling exception.

In v.34, after describing the miraculous grace of God, in delivering Israel from idolatry in Egypt, he reverts twice to the plural, ‘all that the LORD your God did for **you**’, though even then He restores the singular before the end of the clause, ‘before **thine** eyes’, as a reminder of the means of Israel’s salvation, witnessing and trusting His uniqueness and His sovereign power. Once again, the AV finds the rapid switching of number ungrammatical in English and preserves the plural, while the Hebrew is singular.

The singular and unitary nature of God is strongly underscored, even by the singular number address to Israel, as she returns to this recognition, ‘Unto **thee** it was shewed, that **thou** might know that the LORD He is God; **there is none else beside Him**’, v.35, ‘the LORD He is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: **there is none else**’, v.39.

v.30 indicates, we shall see the reality of this promise fulfilled properly in the ‘last days’.

Chapter 11 – Another variegated passage

[A map of the use of the plurals and singulars for Deut.11 is here.](#)

There is an interesting transition from ch.10 with the multitude of Israel as the stars of Heaven, all in the singular, but clearly referencing the whole nation, to the whole hearted love of one to his God, at the outset of this chapter. It is characterised by singlehearted, singular, lifelong obedience.

17 inflexions in the number of the address are found here. We'll attempt to chart these switches and see how they reflect patterns of emphasis we have observed before.

In v.2 s the first change as the future progeny are considered, and 8 consecutive plurals over 7 consecutive verses are marked before a single singular occurs in v.8. **Your** children will not have the benefit of **your** hindsight, unless they are well instructed and warned, they too may end up like Dathan and Abiram, or like the Egyptians before them.

The first singular here reminds the nation that God dealt with them collectively, as well as individually, '**ye** keep all the commandments which I command **thee**' (not **you** as the AV has it, observing the contextual plurals, but not here reflecting the Hebrew). The plural quickly returns, 'that **ye** may be strong, and go in' for another 7 times.

In contrast with Egypt from which **ye** came out, in v.10, **thou** shall enter into Canaan. The former agricultural activities are described in the singular, '**thou** sowed **thy** seed, and **watered(s)** it with **thy** foot'.

In v.11, **ye** shall enter Canaan, for an inheritance, but it is not at all the same as Egypt. **Thy** God (x2) watches over it closely, v.12. Blessing is conditional here.

v.13 starts with a warning, **if ye** will hearken carefully, and 5 more plurals follow.

v.14 describes the fruit of obedience, after a single plural for **your** land, 8 single addresses follow in this verse and the next, '**thou** may gather in **thy** corn' and '**thou** may eat and be **full** (s)'.

However the danger of complacency and careless ingratitude loom large, reminiscent of the toxic triplet in the Song, 32.15 which precedes the switch there to the plural in the very next clause. So also here, in v.16, 'Take heed to **yourselves**, that **your** heart be not deceived, and **ye** turn aside, and [**ye**] serve other gods, and [**ye**] worship them'. Plural gods equal divided, schismatic people. 17 succeeding plurals are found from here to v.19.

The remedy is found in v.19, all of **you** teach **your** children, when **thou** sit, when **thou** rise, when **thou** lie, when **thou** travel, after applying the plural reminders in v.18, and the singular refreshers in v.20.

Almost all the rest of the chapter is in the plural, as if to underscore the near inevitability of their imminent national apostasy. 35 times the plural address is used. There are two breaks, the first occurs in v.26, and it is the singular imperative 'see', which as we have seen before, is an address to the whole nation to behold, to attend, to hearken to salvation, like the serpent in the wilderness, Num.21.8-9,

Jn.3.14. The second time is more prolonged, and refers in v.29, to the placing of blessing and cursing on the mountains near Shechem, where Abraham first sojourned in Canaan, and Jacob also bought land.

Conclusion

There are many other areas of theological reflection upon which this observation impacts, which we have tentatively explored. Number does not usually disclose a hidden sense, but it does commonly serve as an emphasis of a meaning already being presented.

Idolatry leads to fracture. Polytheism leads to factionalism, as attributes of Deity are worshipped as deities, or gifts exalted above the Giver.

Complacency, ingratitude and wealth often provide fertile ground for this decline, and must be guarded against carefully.

The unity of God's Word, reflected in the many aspects and precepts of the Divine will, unite us individually as one, and unite God's people, despite the richest diversity of background and outlook, in glorifying God. Loving God with all our being, unites all that we are to Him, as particular people and as a people.

Special attention to the training of the young to cherish the Word, and to binding the Word into our own lives, as well as theirs, not just in worship, but in every area of daily obedience is needed.

Remembering the Exodus from sin and folly, the power of God's grace, the great deliverances from temptation is a strong remedy.

The role of the passage over Jordan, symbolic of death and of Heaven, is often underscored as a unifier.

Most crucial of all is the role of the Mediator, the Altar, and an Atonement, all are essential to a right approach to God. In the Redeemer from slavery to sin is our Unity and life, 15.15, 24.18, though raised an outsider to Judaea. The true and better Covenant with God, is mediated by, revealed through and guaranteed by this better Representative⁶, Who was not barred by Jordan, but crossed through to conquer, Yehoshua, the name of the Messiah.

⁶ 'That He may *establish* thee', 30.13, the preemption of Jer.31.31, Ezek.39.23-29, 37.21-28 and of course, Hebrews 8.8-13.