

# TORAHSCOPE: Ekev (Because)

by Mark Huey posted 30 July, 2010 www.outreachisrael.net

Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25

Isaiah 49:14-51:3

## “Because of a Circumcised Heart”

*Ekev* continues Moses’ monologue to the people of Israel as he is anticipating his death. He knows that his days are numbered, and how he is charged with preparing the Israelites to enter into the Promised Land. In many respects, the entire Book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ last will and testament to his beloved Israel. Following Deuteronomy’s recollections and instructions will be critical for a successful conquest of Canaan. Like any good leader, Moses knows the power of words—and as we saw last week in *V’et’chanan*, Moses is quite aware that he has been chosen to be the communicator of the voice of God to the people (Deuteronomy 4:2).

As we reflect on *Ekev* this week, one of the very first things we notice is that the term *ekev* (עָקֵב), from which our *parashah* gets its name, begins the reading: *v’hayah ekev* (וְהָיָה עָקֵב), “Then it shall come about, because...” (Deuteronomy 7:12). You might consider what I have to say on *Ekev* to be a bit of a stretch, but I do wonder if there is something about the Hebrew term *ekev* that might communicate important messages to Bible readers. While stylistically *ekev* can be translated a variety of ways throughout English Bibles, *TWOT* describes how it means “**consequence**. Usually occurs as an adverbial accusative, as a consequence of, because.” I simply ask, does this seemingly, insignificant connecting word have a more important meaning than just “because”?

Within our lives, we can probably all remember prefacing answers to questions with the word “because.” We have certainly heard other people use “because” to justify various actions, saying “*Because* of such-and-such I did so-and-so,” or “*Because* of so-and-so, such-and-such happened.” How many times have you encountered an immature child, who has been caught in the wrong, use “because” as an excuse? Frequently in speech today, we see a term like “because” used—really exposing some of the negative reasons or causes because of an action committed. Yet at the same time, the English term “because” can have positive uses as well. Within *Ekev*, is it possible that God is trying to get Israel to seriously consider the absolute root of their convictions, that they might take certain actions? Let us consider a variety of instances where *ekev* appears, so we can evaluate the function(s) it performs.

The opening verses of *Ekev* include a response to the final verses which concluded *V’et’chanan* last week. Recall how Moses ended his pleadings with a command to the Israelites: “Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them” (Deuteronomy 7:11). This summary statement covers a broad range of instructions that have been given to Israel during the wilderness journey. Now this week as *Ekev* begins, we see a positive affirmation implied in the term *ekev* or “because,” listing some of the blessings that the Israelites will receive as a result of obeying the commandments given:

“Then it shall come about, because [*v’hayah ekev*] you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your forefathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there will be no male or female barren among you or among your cattle” (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).

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<sup>1</sup> J. Barton Payne, “עָקֵב” in *TWOT*, 2:691.

*Ekev* is employed to describe the blessings that the Israelites will receive if they obey the Lord. The term *ekev* is only used two times in our Torah portion,<sup>2</sup> and only nine other times in the rest of the Torah.<sup>3</sup> At the conclusion of Deuteronomy 8, Moses reminds Israel of the consequences they will incur if they do not listen to the Lord:

“But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as *it is* this day. It shall come about if you ever forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you today that you will surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so you shall perish; because you would not listen to the voice of the LORD your God [*ekev lo tishme'un b'qol YHWH אלהיכם*, לא תשמעון בקול יהוה אלהיכם]” (Deuteronomy 8:18-20).

What you discover between the two “*ekev* bookends” of our *parashah* (Deuteronomy 7:12 and 8:20) is a list of some of the benefits for Israel’s obedience to God, and some of the serious consequences for disobedience. The blessings bestowed upon Israel—from fertility to disease prevention to expulsion of nations from the Promised Land<sup>4</sup>—are described. Details about how to deal with pagan idols,<sup>5</sup> and helpful reminders about the forty-year wilderness journey,<sup>6</sup> are included. Moses does this to remind the Israelites about the provisions that have been maintained by God since their departure from Egypt.

While pondering the two opposite results of listening versus not listening to the voice of God, a further look at some of the other uses of the Hebrew term *ekev* seemed appropriate. I thought that perhaps some insight could be gleaned from other contexts where *ekev* is used.

The first time *ekev* appears in Scripture is where Abraham has not withheld his son Isaac for sacrifice. God will appropriately bless him because of his obedience:

“Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, ‘By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice [*ekev asher shama'ta b'qoli, עֲקֵב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי*]” (Genesis 22:15-18).

The second time *ekev* appears is where Isaac is warned by God not to travel to Egypt, but rather to remain in Canaan. Isaac, as the son of Abraham, will be an agent of blessing to the world because of the obedience of his father:

“The LORD appeared to him and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me [*ekev asher-shama Avraham b'qoli, עֲקֵב אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַע אַבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי*] and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (Genesis 26:2-5).

Finally, a third time before this Torah portion where *ekev* is used, is in the description of the faith exhibited by Caleb, one of the two faithful spies:

“But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully [*ekev hayatah ruach acheret immo v'yemalleih acharay, עֲקֵב הָיְתָה רוּחַ אַחֶרֶת עִמּוֹ וַיַּמְלֵיחַ אַחֲרָי*], I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it” (Numbers 14:24).

In these three examples of *ekev*, preceding our *parashah* this week, we see how “because” is used to describe either obedience to God or people faithfully following Him. Certainly, every

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 7:12; 8:20.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:15; 22:18; 25:26; 26:5; 27:36; 49:17, 19; Numbers 14:24.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 7:12-8:20.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 7:16, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 8:2-5.

usage of *ekev* in the Tanakh is contingent on context—and as I have previously mentioned, in speech today “because” is often used to self-justify one’s sinful actions. But most important to us as people of faith is how *ekev* does indeed explain specific ways of how the Lord can demonstrate His favor to individuals who have heeded Him. And is this not one of the main points of *Ekev* that we are reading about? Is it possible that God was trying to get the Ancient Israelites—and by extension us today—to seriously consider following Him with their whole hearts?

Within *Ekev* Moses makes the serious point to Israel that God is going to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, because of His previous promises made—and also because of the Canaanites’ own wickedness and sin.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, within these words Moses also declares to Israel that *they* are quite stubborn and discordant, frequently not wanting to follow the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

“Know, then, *it* is not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people... The LORD spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people’” (Deuteronomy 9:6, 13).

After recalling how a second set of Ten Commandments had to be written, and how the Levites were separated out for duty as priests,<sup>9</sup> Moses reminds Israel of the critical duty that is required of them:

“Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, *and* to keep the LORD’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

The Israelites must fear or revere the Holy One, walk in His ways, love Him, and serve Him **with all their hearts and all their souls**. *The problem was that too many had hard hearts*. Just how were they going to deal with those hard, stubborn hearts that they had? Moses provides an answer: a change of heart. The Lord demands that His people possess a circumcised heart, which will be sensitive to Him and to His ways:

“So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name” (Deuteronomy 10:16-20).

As you read this injunction to for the Israelites to circumcise their hearts, you might consider the varied usages of *ekev* I mentioned—describing the obedience of Abraham and Isaac, and the faithfulness of Caleb. We cannot know whether these individuals consciously had heard of the idea to “circumcise” their hearts, but what we do know is that they were not stubborn and stiff-necked in their relationship with God. They knew of the Lord’s supreme power, and they desired to accomplish His will and purposes, not resisting Him or disbelieving Him.

The command for people to circumcise their hearts is not the whole picture of what it means to submit to the Lord. Later in Deuteronomy, Moses asserts how the Lord Himself will have to circumcise hearts—indicating how this is not only a human action, but also a Divine action:

“Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

To this may be added the Prophet Ezekiel’s expectation of how in the era of the New Covenant, people will be given new hearts, filled up with God’s Spirit:

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 9:1-5.

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 9:6-29.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 10:1-9.

new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

Both a heart circumcision and transplant refer to how the Lord will give His people the desire and ability to fully obey Him and walk in His ways. This will come not out of compulsion, but rather be a positive result of the love people have toward Him and for the acts of deliverance He has accomplished. There is no greater act of deliverance that we can conceive of than the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah at Golgotha (Calvary), and how it results in us possessing eternal life:

“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Yeshua the Messiah our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

Do you truly have a circumcised heart of flesh, that eagerly desires to obey the Lord and accomplish His tasks for your life? Do you receive of the blessings promised to those who follow the commandments? How will the Lord describe your life when you meet Him face to face? If there were any descriptions of your life employing the Hebrew word *ekev*, would they at all be similar to those of Abraham, Isaac, and Caleb?

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