

Parashah One Hundred and Fifty

Deuteronomy 33:1–29; Joshua 1:1–18; Jude 1

notes by Tim Hegg

“This Book of the Torah shall not depart”

Our *parashah* contains the words of Moses, spoken as a blessing over the nation of Israel prior to his final ascent to the mountain on which he would die. Facing the final days of his life, Moses turns his attention to the essential foundation of the Torah as the life and future for the nation he had led from the time of his divine appointment as their leader in Egypt. The section is composed of an introduction (vv. 1–5) describing the coming of Adonai from the region of Mt. Sinai to protect and fight for Israel; blessings (vv. 6–25) over the tribes of Israel, comprising the body of his final words; praise (vv. 26–29) of the Most High and His relationship to Israel as divine King and Protector.

The opening verse seems to indicate that the words of Moses which comprise this song of blessing were written down by someone else, since the language is cast in the 3rd person: “Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. He said...” We may surmise that this final blessing upon Israel by Moshe rabbinu (Moses our teacher) was recorded after his death. Yet we may be certain that, by divine assistance, the record of Moses’ final words is accurate and precise being inspired by the Spirit of God.

The introduction describes, in poetic phrases, the coming of Adonai from Mt. Sinai and regions to the south with His myriad of troops called “holy ones” (מִרְבַּבַּת קֹדֶשׁ). He is pictured as the divine Warrior whose spear is a bolt of lightning (cf. Hab 3:3–4). However, the translation of the Stone Tanach, “from His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them” is based upon a *qere* reading noted by the Masoretes. The note in the Masorah says to read the difficult word אֲשֶׁדָּת as two words, אֵשׁ דָּת, which would yield “fire of law.” The Targum has: “The writing of His right hand from the midst of the fire is the Torah he gave us.” This is more a theologically driven translation than one that adheres to the literary sense of the words. The Lxx has “on His right hand were angels (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*) with Him,” which is no doubt the basis for the several times in the Apostolic Scriptures where “angels” accompany the giving of the Torah (cf. Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). We should accept the word אֲשֶׁדָּת, *ashdah*, as a combination of אֵשׁ, *eish*, “fire” and one of several semitic verbs that connote “to throw” or “to shoot” (שָׁדָה, in Old Aramaic and Syriac, or שָׁדָה, in Ugaritic and Hebrew, cf. Jer 50:14), and thus meaning “to cast fire,” a description of lightning.

Pictured as Israel’s defender, the Almighty arrives with the weapon of lightning in His hand, perhaps symbolic of His self-revelation in the Torah, the very essence of the covenant between Himself and His people. The Torah embodies Israel’s prime inheritance (מִוִּרְשָׁה), v. 4 and is “commanded” (צִוָּה) to Israel because God “loves” (חָבַב) the people who are identified as “all Your holy ones who are in Your hand.” This is covenant language in which God, as Suzerain or Great King, chooses Israel as His Vassal and commits Himself to her as the One who would protect her and grant to her the blessings He had promised under oath. This picture of Israel being “in His hand” may help explain Is 49:16, “Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.” Israel is therefore “set apart” (holy) to Him as the only nation with whom He has entered into covenant (v. 3). He is “King in Yeshurun” (v. 5), the name of Israel given to describe her sanctified status within the covenant of Torah (“Yeshurun” means “upright ones,” cf. Is 44:2).

Thus from the beginning of the blessings Moses would give to Israel before his death, he focuses on the great gift of God's self revelation, particularly in giving them His Torah. As Israel's "inheritance," it is her prime possession. It connotes something vital and cherished. Compare Ps 119:111, "Your decrees are my eternal heritage, they are my heart's delight." Because v. 4 is such a succinct and pithy expression of God's love to Israel in giving the Torah, as well as expressing the great value of the Torah to Israel, the Sages chose it along with the first verse of the Shema as the first biblical verses to be taught to a child when he or she is able to speak.

The order of the tribes listed within the blessings of Moses is as follows: Reuben, Judah, Levi, Benjamin, Joseph (Ephraim/Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, Gad, Dan, Naphtali, and Asher. Simeon is not mentioned, and this was considered problematic by some ancient scribes. The Lxx adds a blessing for Simeon in v. 6b, "and let Simeon be many in number." Others have suggested that the blessing for Simeon is alluded to in the opening words of v. 7, "Hear (shema), Adonai," since these were the words of Leah explaining Simeon's name (Gen 29:33), and that the blessing somehow dropped out during generations of copying the manuscripts. This is unlikely, however, and there are no indications in the various Hebrew manuscripts (including Qumran) that any Hebrew original contained a blessing for Simeon. (It would seem that the Lxx is simply attempting to correct what it saw as an obvious omission.) There are no satisfying explanations for the omission, however. We may speculate that since Simeon's territory was within that of Judah's (Josh 19:1-9; Judges 1:13), and since Simeon was a small tribe, that Simeon simply shared in Judah's blessing. The impetus for leaving out the name may have been the need to arrive at the number 12 for the tribes, Joseph being represented by his two sons.

More important, perhaps, is the order in which the tribes are listed. Reuben is restored to his place as firstborn, even though the blessing of the firstborn had apparently passed to Judah in the Joseph narrative (Gen 43:1-10). Since Judah stands as surety for Benjamin, Reuben's selfish attempts are apparently disregarded in lieu of Judah's willingness to offer himself. Yet though the historical birth order is highlighted, Judah's blessing shows clearly that he stands in a prominent position.

The blessings themselves are essentially an expansion of the various names given to the sons, or a prayer for the success of their respective duties and positions within the nation. Reuben's blessing is a prayer that though his numbers would be few, he yet would survive. However, Reuben's population is not notably small in the censuses of Num 1 and 26. Some have suggested that Gad, who is said to be enlarged (vv. 20-21), may have assimilated some of Reuben's territory.

Judah's blessing contains a curious line: "Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah, and bring him to his people" (v. 7). What is meant by "bring him to his people?" Does this allude to the "ruler" of Jacob's original blessing (Gen 49:10) and the "Shilo" figure? The picture seems to be of a warrior who has left to do battle, and thus a prayer of blessing for his return is offered. This would fit the picture of Judah with a scepter and ruler's staff as found in Gen 49:10.

Levi is given the duty of teaching the Torah to the people, and representing the people in the priestly functions. The Tummim and Urim (only here in this order; usually Urim and Tummim) were some device by which the Priest could discern the will of God for the people in specific situations. The exact function and even the name itself is less than certain. But the Urim and Tummim are mention first to show the vital function of the Levites in leading the people according to God's direction. "Your godly man" refers to Levi, the father of the tribe, and thus representative of the whole. The text says that the Levites were "proved at Massah" and that they were "contended with

at Meribah.” It appears that Moses is speaking of times when the Levites remained faithful to God while the majority of the people forsook Him. Such was the case at the Golden Calf incident as well as the Baal-Peor debacle, but neither of these happened at the places mentioned in our text. Rather, at Massah and Meribah, the people murmured against Moses and Aaron. “Reference is made to the trials at Massah and at the water of strife, on the principle that the Lord humbles His servants before He exalts them, and confirms those that are His by trying and proving them” (Keil & Delitzsch on Deut 33:8). Some have suggested that Massah and Meribah were chosen because they represent the beginning and end of the Israelite journey by which the Levites were tested.

V. 9 describes the Levites as disregarding close family relationships. This must refer to the fact that as Judges, the Levites could give no special treatment to family members. Thus, at the Golden Calf incident, the Levites followed Moses’ orders to execute the guilty whether son, brother, neighbor, or kin (Ex 32:27–29). In parallel language, Yeshua teaches that to be His disciple, one must be willing to put Him before father or mother, son or daughter (Matt 10:37, cp. Matt 19:29).

To the priests of the Levitical tribe was given the duty and privilege of teaching the commands and precepts of the Lord to the people (v. 10). Parallel to their teaching responsibilities was that of presenting offerings to the Lord upon the brazen altar as well as burning the incense on the golden altar. Thus, their Godward ministries are combined with those directed to the people. One could not stand without the other. This principle may be applied to all teachers of God’s truths: a recognition of the holiness and majesty of God must always be the primary and requisite foundation from which one’s teaching proceeds.

The prayer of blessing for Levi (and thus the priests chosen from this tribe) is twofold: (1) that their service at the altars would be accepted, and (2) that their enemies would be scattered. The enemies of the priests might be understood either as the enemies of Israel generally or as those within Israel who murmured against them and their service. In either case, the enemies of those who are chosen to minister before the Lord and to the people are the enemies of God as well. As Tigay comments (*JPS Commentary*, Deut, p. 325): “...the verse does not necessarily refer to physical assault. The psalms often describe verbal attacks and false accusations hyperbolically as physical danger. The Levites’ enemies could be those who would challenge their exclusive right to priesthood, as Korah and tribal chieftains challenged Aaron’s right.”

Benjamin is as a lamb carried on the shoulders of Adonai, the divine Shepherd. This may relate to the fact that Saul, the first king of Israel, was from the tribe of Benjamin. Or it may hearken back to the words of Jacob who portrayed Benjamin to his brothers as one specially loved (cf. Gen 42:20) to which God Himself agrees, for Benjamin is “יְדִיד יְהוָה, Beloved of Adonai” and thus receives His special protection. The idea of being carried “between” (בֵּין, *bein*) the shoulders may be a play on the first syllable of the name (בֵּן, בְּנֵימִן, “son,” “son of the right hand”).

Joseph receives the longest of the blessings, and the most universal, and stands for the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. The blessing of Joseph, which involves the fertility of the ground in producing crops, may be derived from the name Joseph (יֹסֵף, “May he increase”) and Ephraim (אֶפְרַיִם, “God has made me fertile,” cf. Gen 41:52). The word “bounty” (מְגֵד, *megeḏ*) characterizes the blessing, being found five times. The word גֶּרֶשׁ, *geresh* is used only here, and its given meaning “crop” is derived from its parallel to the former lines. The plural “moons” (יְרַחִים, *yerachim*) most likely is a poetic equivalent of “months” and refers to the cycle of the agricultural year. But the bounty of crops contains a metaphoric sense of general blessing, and particularly the blessing of God’s presence as the phrase “the favor of Him Who dwelt in the bush” (v. 16) makes plain.

For Moses to use this reference hearkens back to his own encounter with the Eternal One and the revelation of the Name as encompassing God's covenant relationship with Israel. Joseph's blessing extends to the "ends of the earth" meaning that his dominance would overcome even the remotest of enemies, and would eventually encompass all of the nations in fulfillment of the original Abrahamic promise that "in you all the families of the earth would be blessed."

Zebulun and Issachar are noted for their riches. Though the heading names only Zebulun, the blessing includes Issachar since these two neighboring tribes had close associations. The wealth of these tribes comes from their maritime activities. Through their international commerce, wealth will be brought "to the mountain," most likely referring to the building of the Temple on Mt. Zion where sacrifices would be offered. Traditional rabbinic midrash saw the maritime activity of Zebulun as supporting Issachar who would remain "in your tents," taken to mean "in the academies" where they would occupy themselves with the Torah. The phrase "hidden treasures of the sand" may refer to the *Chalizon* from which the *techeilet* dye is derived, used in the blue of the Tabernacle, garments of the High Priest, and the blue of the *tzitzit*.

Gad means "fortune," and was the tribe that settled in the fertile pasturelands of the Transjordan. The phrase "chose for himself the best" (v. 21) could mean the "best" in terms of agricultural land, or it could be "first" in the sense of the region first conquered by Israel. The idea of the "leaders (heads) of the people" gathering and the execution of the justice of Adonai could refer to Dan's request (which was granted) that he settle in the Transjordan with the provision that he, along with the Reubenites, would fight to gain the Land for the other tribes.

The name Dan is related to a semitic root "to judge" (דן) (others conjecture a root meaning "container, barrel."). He is represented as a "lion's whelp," meaning that he would grow in strength, even as a young lion grows and learns the skill of the hunt.

Naphtali (from the verb פתל, "to wrestle," cf. Gen 30:8) possessed the fertile region in the upper Galilee which was "well watered and rich in woods, fruit trees, and many varieties of vegetation. It included the western and southern shore of Lake Tiberias" (Tigay, *JPS*, Deut, p. 332). Thus, Naphtali was known for his fishing industry (see Targum Jonathan).

Asher means "blessing" and this blessing is derived from his name. He will "dip his foot in oil" which doubtlessly refers to the production of olive oil well attested in the highlands of the Galilee. The blessing also asks for the protection of the northern region as though locked with bolts of iron or bronze on a fortress gate.

The final description of God is wrapped up in His connection to Israel. No other nation has a covenant with God as does Israel. His divine protection is therefore upon Israel whom He will defend against the nations. Only in Israel is this protection to be realized, for the God of Israel has "everlasting arms" of protection, that is, "arms which never grow weary," in contrast to Moses' arms which did grow weary, and were in need of assistance. Those who, like Ruth, come under the "wings of the Almighty," find lasting and omnipotent protection, but this haven of refuge is found only for Israel. Once again, the covenant people of Israel form the locus of God's salvation. Only Israel finds that chosen place of covenant among all the peoples of earth and thus only Israel is a people "saved by Adonai." This means that the elect from the nations, whom God has determined to save, must inevitably find their covenant membership and self identity in Yeshua, and through Him, their membership in the people called Israel.

The *haftarah* continues the overarching theme of the glory of the Torah as central to Israel's own identity. Success comes, not by one's own prowess or acumen, but by knowing and apply-

ing the divine precepts of the Torah. Such is gained through constant study and application of the inspired words of God.

In similar fashion, the epistle of Jude admonishes the people to hold fast to the “faith that was once for all handed down to the saints (holy ones)” and not to be misled by those who cause division by despising authority and giving in to fables and myths rather than holding to the word of the Apostles of Yeshua. In v. 14 Jude quotes from Enoch¹ who in turn alludes to our Torah text (Deut 33:2) in which God comes with the myriads of His army to execute justice against His enemies. Jude uses this reference to remind his readers that the Holy One is not to be trifled with, and as an admonition to remain faithful to the truth.

¹ That Jude quotes from Enoch does not give this apocryphal work a canonical status. Quoting a source does not imply that the source as a whole is trustworthy. Paul, for instance, quotes pagan Greek authors. In Acts 17:28 he quotes Aratas, in Tit 1:12 he quotes Epimenides, and in 1Cor 15:33 he quotes Meander. No one, on the basis of these quotes, would suggest that Paul considered these works of Greek philosophers and poets to be canonical. Though Enoch was a well-known and much read work in the early centuries, it never was accepted, either by the rabbinical authorities nor by the Apostles and later Christian Church as canonical Scripture.