

THE LAST WORDS OF MOSES: DEUTERONOMY 33

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Anyone at all conversant with the commentaries on this chapter must be aware of the fact that there are difficulties in it which are not easy to solve. But even though we may not be able to solve all the difficulties, we need not on that account miss the blessings which it contains. After all, the last words of Moses are "the blessing wherewith Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death."

RELATION TO THE VALEDICTORY OF JACOB

In a previous article on "The Last Words of Jacob" (Bibliotheca Sacra, 112:320-29, October-December, 1955), we considered the valedictory of Jacob as he commanded his sons to gather themselves together that he might tell them that which would befall them "in the last days." In the portion now before us, they are addressed as "the sons of Israel." When addressed as the sons of Jacob, the emphasis appears to be on the natural side of things. But when they are addressed as the sons of Israel we note quite a different emphasis. The valedictory of Jacob was uttered when the people were still in Egypt. The blessing of Moses was pronounced as they were on the point of entering the land of promise. There is a lapse of more than two centuries between the two. The blessing of Moses has a background of experience which the valedictory of Jacob could not have even though his personal experience may, in a sense, foreshadow that of the nation of which he was a patriarch.

William Kelly says that the blessing of Moses "is altogether in reference to the land which the people were on the point of entering. This is perhaps the chief difference as compared with Jacob's blessing. In the latter case, notice was taken of the tribes from the beginning of their history to the end, and apart from their possessing the land or not; whereas the blessing that Moses pronounces here is in strictest subordination to the great object of Deuteronomy. . . . Moses does not therefore show us historically the course of things as when Jacob prophesied, but a more specific benediction of the people in view of their place in relation to Jehovah in the land" (William Kelly, *Lectures Introductory Pentateuch*, pp. 519 -20). "Nothing can exceed the grandeur of the closing words of Moses; and they will assuredly be fulfilled in the future brightness and glory of restored Israel" (*ibid.*, p. 523).

Unlike the blessing of Jacob which begins with an address to Reuben his firstborn, that of Moses begins with a majestic vision of the Lord coming from Sinai, rising up from Seir, and shining forth from Mount Paran. In addition to the fact that the places here mentioned are related to Israel, Esau, and Ishmael respectively, we may also note progress in the coming, the rising up, and the shining forth. It is the Lord in His government coming from, or with, His holy ones and having a law of fire in His right hand. The fact that reference is made to His coming from Sinai would seem to connect this with the initial giving of the law and all of the fiery phenomena, symbols of His holiness, which attended that solemn occasion.

But the same one who is light is also love (1 John 1:5; 4:8), and in that order. "Yea, he loveth the peoples, all his saints are in thy hand, and they sit down at thy feet; each receiveth of thy words" (J. N. Darby's translation). The change from the third person "his" to the second person "thy" is not easy to explain. But we have a striking parallel to this, in Exodus 15:1-8. In any case, how reassuring to note that even though He comes to them with a law of fire He loves them and they are in His hand, the place of perfect safety.

Moreover, they sit down at His feet with perfect confidence, Just as Mary did when the Lord was here on earth; and like her, each one receives of His words. These are words suited to the needs of each one. And they not only hear His words, they receive them (cf. Mark 4:20).

The mediator of this covenant is next brought before us. Scripture tells us that the law "was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator" (Gal. 3:19) and that mediator was Moses. "Moses commanded us a law" and it became "the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." Moreover, "he was king in Jeshurun when the heads of the people and the tribes were gathered together." "*Jeshurun*. . . seems to be used as an expression of particular affection; hence Calmet understands it as a *diminutive* of the word Israel. . . the Septuagint seem to have apprehended the full force of the word by translating it *tou egapemenou*, the beloved one, the object of God's especial delight" (Clarke's Commentary, *in loco*). The fact that Moses also exercised the functions of the priesthood on occasion makes him one of the most unusual characters in the Old Testament. In his divinely appointed services for the Lord, he combined the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

MESSAGES TO THE TRIBES

We have already noticed that Moses blessed the people as the sons of Israel rather than as the sons of Jacob. His arrangement of their names is also different. Jacob arranged them in three groups; first, the sons of Leah; then the sons of the bondmaids; and, finally, the sons of Rachel. Moses also begins with the sons of Leah but before he completes the list he introduces the sons of Rachel, parenthetically as it were. We see a similar arrangement in the naming of the sons of the bondmaids. Gad was the son of Zilpah, Leah's maid. His name is followed by the names of the two sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid. The list closes with the name of Asher, son of Zilpah, Leah's maid.

It is also of interest to notice that apart from Reuben

the names are grouped in pairs, and in each case we find that the natural order is reversed. We get an example of a similar procedure in Hebrews 11:32. But an earlier example of the same is found in Genesis 48:12-20 where Jacob is seen putting Ephraim before Manasseh in spite of Joseph's protest. We are told that Jacob guided "his hands wittingly" or intelligently in blessing the lads. In other words, he knew exactly what he was doing. And Moses follows the same procedure in Deuteronomy 33:17.

The omission of Simeon's name from this list has been the subject of much comment as well as speculation. If it had been included, and if the same procedure had been followed which we have noted in connection with the arrangement of the other names, then Simeon's name would have headed the list. The fact that his name comes from a Hebrew root which means *to hear* is suggestive. One may hear without being seen or named. But "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). And the hearing of faith will be the first step in the restoration of Israel. When the "dry bones hear the word of the LORD" (Ezek. 37:4), their national revival will begin. Until they are like branches "broken off" (Rom. 11:17-21). And it may be that the unnamed Simeon here represents them in this phase of their national history.

Then, just as life follows the hearing of faith, for "they that hear shall live" (John 5:25), so now we find the prayer that Reuben may live and not die. The wording of this prayer suggests the idea of never-ending or eternal life. "If the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15). The "fiery law" took its toll even in Moses' day. And except the Lord of hosts had left unto them a very small remnant, they would have been like unto Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:9; Rom. 9:29). Like Reuben, they have been diminished and their men have been few. But "Israel as a nation is imperishable, in virtue of the divine promise, but the mass of the people is henceforth destined to destruction because of the divine sentence of judgment; and only a rem-

nant which turns again will finally propagate Israel's nationality and inherit the glorious future" (Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on Isaiah*, I, 159).

In Judah (v. 7) we hear the cry of those who long to be brought again to their own people. "Judah. . . has been a wanderer, and separated from his people; his hand has brought him no sufficient help, and his enemies have been busy with him. All this suits exactly with what has long been their history, and predicts the deliverance awaiting them in the near future. No tribal name, it is evident, would fill that place but that of Judah, connected with and following, as it does, that of Reuben" (F. W. Grant, *The Numerical Bible*, I, 619). As we all know, anti-Semitism has used that particular tribe as its chief target, separated for the time being from the rest of the nation which is so often referred to as "the lost ten tribes." Again and again they have been threatened with extinction as in the days of Pharaoh and Haman, and more recently in the days of Hitler. But the same one who heard their sighs and their groanings then will hear again and He will deliver them.

But in order to deliver them righteously His own righteousness and holiness must be vindicated. "How God can save, yet righteous be" is clearly seen in the section dealing with Levi (vv. 8-11). "We see, then, why Levi has such a special place in the blessing of Moses. We must look through the tribe and its individual history, to see, as in other cases, the One through whom the blessing comes for Israel. Christ is plainly the One with whom God's Thummim and Urim are, the Holy One, proved at the place of proof, and striven with where the waters of life gushed out. A Moses and an Aaron might give way under pressure, but not the One for whom they stood" (ibid.).

The Levites had this to their credit: they observed the Word of God, and they kept His covenant. In a sense, they were worthy disciples of Jehovah in that they put His claims upon them above the claims of all other relationships, no matter how near and dear they might be (cf. Matt. 10:37). Thus they were spiritually qualified on the one hand to teach

their brethren the judgments and the law of the Lord; on the other hand they were privileged to put incense before Him and whole burnt sacrifice upon His altar. They had a ministry manward as well as Godward. And all of this, we believe, is prophetic of a day yet to come. The section closes quite appropriately with a prayer for blessing, acceptance, and victory.

MESSAGES TO THE SONS OF RACHEL

The portion dealing with Benjamin and Joseph (vv. 12-19) gives us the blessed results of all this. The description of Benjamin as given here stands out in vivid contrast to that given in Genesis 49:27. Here we read: "The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him; and the LORD shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders." Keil and Delitzsch remind us that "there is nothing strange in the change of subject in all three clauses, since it is met with repeatedly even in plain prose (e. g., 2 Sam. 11:13)." This, too, is prophetic of that day when Israel shall again dwell in safety as "the beloved of the LORD. "

The main theme of the blessing of Joseph is fruitfulness, an appropriate conclusion to this division of the valedictory of Moses. This section deserves much fuller treatment than we can give it here. But a few suggestions which may be useful in further study of the subject are in order.

To begin with, we note that the blessings are both heavenly and earthly. But strictly speaking "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17). Accordingly, "the precious things of heaven" are here connected with "the deep that coucheth beneath." In a similar way, "the precious fruits brought forth by the sun" are linked with "the precious things put forth by the moon," suggesting their regular recurrence whether by day or by night.

These heavenly blessings are here followed by earthly blessings described as "the chief things of the ancient moun-

tains" and "the precious things of the lasting hills." "The precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof" remind us of Psalm 24:1 and are therefore suggestive of the millennial reign of our Lord.

The crowning blessing of all is "the good will of him that dwelt in the bush." The Hebrew word here used for is the same as that found in Exodus 3:2-4. It is literally a thorn bush, reminding us of the curse pronounced in Eden (Gen. 3:18). It was out of the burning thorn bush that Moses heard God say: "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt. . . and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:7-8). It is the good will of this one that is to "come upon the head of Joseph, and upon the top of the head of him that was separated from his brethren." The reader of the original will recognize in the "separated one" the "Nazirite." And one has but to mention this to show how suggestive of the Messiah and His reign is all that we have here in the blessing of Joseph.

Much of the foregoing is quite similar to Jacob's blessing of Joseph as given in Genesis 49:22-26. But Moses concludes his blessing of Joseph with a prediction which goes far beyond that. Looking ahead to a day yet to come he says: "His glory [or "his majesty"] is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of Unicorns: with them shall he push the people together to the ends of the earth" (v. 17). Consistent with the scheme of interpretation which we have used thus far, we can see in these words the ultimate triumph of the Messiah, of whom Joseph was the type in his day. Nothing like this ever happened in Joseph's day. But a greater than Joseph is here.

The introduction of Ephraim and Manasseh at this point reminds us that in blessing these two sons of Joseph Jacob said: "In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh: and he set Ephraim before Manasseh" (Gen. 48:20). Ephraim means double fruitfulness, and Manasseh means forgetting (cf. Gen. 41:51-52). The

fact that "the ten thousands of Ephraim" far outnumber "the thousands of Manasseh" indicates that the prophecy of Jacob will be abundantly fulfilled when Messiah "shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied. "

After the long parenthesis which deals with the sons and grandsons of Rachel the beloved, Moses returns again to the sons of Leah. Zebulun, her sixth son, is told to rejoice in his going out. If this is also prophetic, as we have reason to believe that it is, then we have here a preview of the ministry of restored Israel to the Gentiles in a day yet to come (cf. Isa. 66:19; Matt. 24:14). And since Issachar's name means *hire* or *reward* (cf. Gen. 30:18), we can see how appropriate is the order of the names here.

In the blessing of these two brethren, we see two lines of ministry. The one goes forth, as it were, with the gospel of the kingdom. The other, rejoicing in his tents or tabernacles, is presumably engaged in a ministry which will complement that of his brother. Together they will invite the peoples (Gentiles) to the mountain where they offer the sacrifices of righteousness. The language here is so similar to that of Isaiah 2:2-3 and Micah 4:1-2 that we are bound to conclude that here also we have that which looks on to the millennium. The sacrifices to be offered then (Ezek. 43:18 ff.) will be offered as memorials of the infinitely greater sacrifice of Him who fulfilled them all in the offering up of Himself. And these memorials will serve to keep that blessed fact always before the worshippers.

Finally, "the abundance of the seas, and of treasures hid in the sand," show how that which is largely unproductive today will then yield its hidden riches, when all nature is brought under the beneficent sway of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And with this we come to the conclusion of the second major division of our chapter.

MESSAGES TO THE SONS OF THE BONDWOMEN

The third division deals with the blessing on the sons of the bondmaids. It is arranged according to the pattern used,

as we have seen in verses 6-19, for the sons of the free women, the sons of Rachel's maid coming in between the sons of Leah's maid. The keynote of this portion is the execution of "the justice of the LORD, and his judgments with Israel." But it is evident as we read these verses that it is not His judgment upon Israel, but rather in their behalf. Accordingly, the section begins with a note of praise to Him who "enlargeth Gad" (cf. Isa. 49:19-20). And the verses which follow this show how it will be done. "Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey. . . so shall the LORD of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof" (Isa. 31:4). "And he provided the first part for himself, because there, in a portion of the lawgiver, was he seated." He Himself had buried Moses in the portion of Gad, and because of that it is here called the "portion of the lawgiver." When this is finally fulfilled, the present dispensation will have ended and the dispensation of law will be resumed. Absolute righteousness will prevail because "the sceptre of his kingdom is a right sceptre" (cf. Ps. 45:6).

Dan, the son of Bilhah, Rachel's maid, is also likened to a lion, or "a lion's whelp." The fact that "he shall leap from Bashan" leads us to believe that here "we have one who will oppose "the Lion of the tribe of Judah." It will not be the first time that opposition to Messiah has come from that quarter. According to Psalm 22:12, Bashan's strong ones beset Him round as He hung on the cross, forsaken of God and man. Typical of these was Og, king of Bashan, who was the last of the giants for which that land was noted (Deut. 3:11). Bashan was the last country to be subdued before the Israelites actually entered the land of Canaan. Some commentators discern in these giants types of the wicked spirits which oppose the child of God even now (cf. Eph. 6:12). In any case, we know that "antichrist shall come" (1 John 2:18) "whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:8). And we believe Dan to be a type of that one. His destruction prepares the way for the satisfaction and the full blessing of Jehovah which we see in the blessing of Naphtali,

the son of Bilhah, Rachel's maid. And this blessing will be so full that he is commanded to possess the west and the south in order to make room for it.

Finally, in Asher we reach a happy climax. These blessings are not confined to that generation. Asher shall be blessed with children for "the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children" (Ps. 103:17). The fact that Asher is to be acceptable to his brethren may indicate that there is to be no feeling against him because he was one of those who were chosen to stand on mount Ebal to curse (Deut. 27:13). He is to be allowed to dip his foot in oil, beautiful figure of a walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). His shoes shall be of iron and brass, the symbols of strength and endurance. And as his days so shall his strength or rest be. And it is on that note that Moses concludes his blessing of the sons of Israel.

In the last major division of this valedictory, Moses returns to the same theme with which he began, the one who is incomparable in His glory and in His grace. "There is none like the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky." He is the eternal one, the immutable one, who has ever been a refuge of His own. And His never-failing arms are their constant support and protection. And He shall not only thrust out the enemy before them, but command his destruction. "Israel shall then dwell in safety alone." His land will be known then as a land of corn and wine, with the heavens dropping down refreshing dew upon it, thus insuring its continued freshness. Well may we join with the patriarch in saying: "Happy art thou, O Israel who is like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency!" And triumphant over every foe she may now enter "the rest that remaineth for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9).

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