

Deuteronomy 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 33 This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death. He said, Thus the Lord became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together.

Let Reuben live and not die, but let his men be few. And this he said of Judah, Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah, and bring him in to his people, with your hands contend for him, and be a help against his adversaries.

And of Levi he said, Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarrelled at the waters of Meribah, who said of his father and mother, I regard them not.

He disowned his brothers, and ignored his children, for they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules, and Israel your law. They shall put incense before you, and hold burnt offerings on your altar.

Bless, O Lord, his substance, and accept the work of his hands. Crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again. Of Benjamin he said, The beloved of the Lord dwells in safety.

[1 : 35] The high God surrounds him all day long, and dwells between his shoulders. And of Joseph he said, Blessed by the Lord be his land, with the choicest gifts of heaven above, and of the deep that crouches beneath, with the choicest fruits of the sun, and the rich yield of the months, with the finest produce of the ancient mountains, and the abundance of the everlasting hills, with the best gifts of the earth in its fullness, and the favour of him who dwells in the bush.

May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the pate of him who is prince among his brothers. A firstborn bull, he has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox.

With them he shall gore the peoples, all of them to the ends of the earth. They are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh. And of Zebulun he said, Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out, and Issachar in your tents.

They shall call peoples to their mountain. There they offer right sacrifices, for they draw from the abundance of the seas, and the hidden treasures of the sand. And of Gad he said, Blessed be he who enlarges Gad.

Gad crouches like a lion. He tears off arm and scalp. He chose the best of the land for himself, for there a commander's portion was reserved, and he came with the heads of the people.

[2 : 52] With Israel he executed the justice of the Lord, and his judgments for Israel. And of Dan he said, Dan is a lion's cub that leaps from Bashan. And of Naphtali he said, O Naphtali sated with favour, and full of the blessing of the Lord, possess the lake and the south.

And of Asher he said, Most blessed of sons be Asher. Let him be the favourite of his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil. Your baths shall be iron and bronze, and as your days, so shall your strength be.

There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you, and said, Destroy. So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine, whose heavens drop down due.

Happy are you, O Israel, who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph. Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread upon their backs.

[3 : 59] Like the preceding chapter of the Song of Moses, chapter 33 of Deuteronomy has a poetic form. There are a variety of genre types within it, and the blessings of Deuteronomy 33 focus upon

Israel's life after it enters into the land.

Most of the blessings of Moses are written in a parallel form, consistent with the usual pattern of Hebrew poetry. It is a series of blessings upon the tribes of Israel, similar to those that we have in Genesis chapter 49, when Jacob blessed his twelve sons.

Like Jacob, Moses is about to die, and he is blessing the nation before he departs. If Genesis ended with the blessings and the death of Jacob, the Pentateuch ends with the blessings and the death of Moses.

While there are some horrific curses in the book of Deuteronomy, ending in this way implies that the Lord's primary purpose for Israel is one of blessing them. Indeed, there are a great many points of similarity between the content of this and the material in Genesis 49.

For instance, Deuteronomy chapter 33, verse 16, May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the pate of him who is prince among his brothers. And this can be compared with Genesis chapter 49, verse 26, May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

[5 : 18] However, the blessings of Jacob don't have the same sort of introductory or concluding poetic sections that Moses' blessings have here, even though the blessings of Jacob is the most similar other part of scripture.

While Jacob's blessings were addressed to individuals that were going to become tribes, the blessings of Moses are addressed to tribes and to the larger nation that they form, which comes into focus at the beginning and the end of the blessings, where the whole nation is addressed. There are also similarities with this and the song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5, verse 4 to 5, for instance. And then in verses 14 to 18 of the same chapter.

Beyond this, we might also see some ways in which this material could be compared to the blessings of Balaam.

In Numbers chapter 23 to 24, the language of the beginning and the end of the blessings also have various resemblances with elements of certain psalms. There are ten blessings for the twelve tribes.

[7 : 11] There is no blessing for Simeon, and Issachar and Zebulun are blessed together as a single blessing. Simeon was judged with dispersal in Genesis chapter 49, verses 5 to 7.

As Simeon's territory would end up being an enclave of Judah, perhaps Simeon is here included under Judah.

Some have noted the fact that Judah's blessing begins with Hear, O Lord, with here being the verb from which Simeon's name was originally derived. Moses begins by recalling Sinai, where the law was given.

The Lord is presented as the great king of Israel. Having led Israel up from the south, Israel followed the law like a great military band, and the ordering of the blessings seems to follow a geographical movement through the places where they would finally end up settling in the land. However, there are clear subgroups. The initial sons of Leah, Reuben, Judah and Levi, followed by the sons of Rachel, Benjamin and Joseph, followed by Issachar and Zebulun, the final two sons of Leah, followed by the handmaid's children.

[8 : 33] Reuben comes first. He's the firstborn of Jacob's sons. He was judged in Genesis 49 on account of the fact that he went into his father's concubine, Bilhah. Moses' blessing of Reuben has a sort of ambivalent character.

He desires that the tribe continue, but not that they truly prosper. Judah comes next, and whereas Judah's blessing is quite extensive in Genesis 49, it is fairly short here by comparison.

It's not one of the prominent ones. Judah's blessing is a prayer. As I already noted, Simeon, while not explicitly mentioned, may be included under Judah. Judah's military role, and perhaps his leadership of Israel in this role, is suggested here.

In Numbers chapter 2, the tribe of Judah leads the entire camp as it marches. Levi comes next. Levi proved faithful in guarding the covenant when tested. The Levites were prepared to slave relatives in Exodus chapter 32, after the sin with the golden calf.

Likewise, in Numbers 25, Phineas the Levite proved faithful in zealously defending the Lord's holiness. For the Levites, the covenant of the Lord took priority over all earthly ties, and Levi was entrusted with the priesthood for this reason, guarding and teaching the law, and upholding the true worship of the Lord.

[9 : 49] Benjamin follows. Benjamin is the son born to the loved wife in her death, and he's referred to as the beloved of the Lord, who is given secure rest in the land. Joseph follows.

He's the older brother of Benjamin by Rachel. In Genesis 49, the two great sets of blessings belong to Judah and Joseph. Here they belong to the Levites and Joseph.

Joseph, of course, includes the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph's blessing is one of the bounty of the fertile earth, but also strength in war and leadership. And elements of the blessing recall parts of Joseph's blessing in Genesis 49.

For instance, in verses 25-26 of that chapter. The Almighty will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your Father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

[10 : 47] There are several parallels between this and Deuteronomy chapter 33, verses 13-16, not least the reference to the blessings of the heavens above and the deep that crouches beneath.

In both places, Joseph's blessing focuses upon elements of the fundamental order of creation. One interesting feature of Joseph's blessings is the apparent reference to the Lord as him who dwells in the bush, presumably looking back to the story of the burning bush in Exodus.

Zebulun is next. The blessing of Zebulun includes Issachar. Zebulun was the younger of the two sons, but he comes first here before Issachar. We see these two brothers listed as a pair in this order elsewhere, in Genesis 49 and also in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.

Judah and Levi in this chapter and Benjamin and Joseph are also reversed in birth order. In their blessing, Judah and Issachar are said to enjoy the blessings of the sea, but also to be a territory in which a divine sanctuary would be located, presumably Mount Tabor.

Now we move on to Gad. The blessing of Gad might refer to the fact that Gad was one of the tribes that went ahead of the others in taking possession of the land in the Transjordan region. Dan is described as a lion's cup, perhaps associated with Gad in some ways, but also with Judah, which is described as a lion in Genesis 49.

[12 : 08] Woods suggests that Israel is guarded by lion tribes in both the north, where Dan finally ended up, and in the south, where Judah was. Naphtali comes next, and Naphtali is in the far north in the Galilee region.

Asher ends the list. His territory may have been more vulnerable to attack, which might explain the blessing upon bars and strength. The end of the blessings frame the entire central section with the introductory section.

The Lord is the unique God of Jeshurun, a warrior God who will give his people security on all sides and richness of blessing in the land. These are the verses on which the main message of the book closes.

The Lord is incomparable among the gods. He will bless his people. He will secure their future for them. He will give them rest in the land. A question to consider.

What are some of the changes that you can see between the blessings of Jacob and the blessings of Moses? What might be the reason for some of these?