

Deuteronomy 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the plain, that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.

And the Lord said to him, This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor, but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.

Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigour unabated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days.

Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

[1 : 1 1] And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Deuteronomy chapter 34 is the end of the book of Deuteronomy, but also the end of the Pentateuch. It tells of the end of Moses' life and his death and burial. Moses is brought up onto the mountain where he can see the land before him.

He's shown the land like Abram has shown the land in Genesis chapter 13 verses 14 to 15. The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.

Moses is described as the servant of the Lord. He's the great servant of the Lord, faithful in all the Lord's house. He doesn't enter the land though in part because he is just a servant, with a particular task, one who proved unfaithful at a key moment.

He is not ultimately the hero, the one who accomplishes the exodus. Rather the Lord is the one who does this. The great servant dies before the great work is completed, because it doesn't ultimately depend upon him and his strength, leadership and charisma.

[2 : 3 6] It is the work of the Lord. His eyes are undimmed and his vigour unabated. He retains his vision and he retains his energy. And the two things go together. Moses' energy arises in no small measure from his sense of calling.

Not just physical vision, but the spiritual vision of what God has put before Israel and the need to reach out and grasp it. After Moses dies, the people mourn for him for 30 days, much as they did for Aaron in Numbers chapter 20 verse 29.

Joshua takes over at this point. He has the spirit of wisdom as Moses laid his hands on him. Joshua was like a son in relation to Moses. He had been Moses' close personal assistant for almost 40 years from his own youth.

When Moses and the Israelites were at Sinai, Joshua accompanied him up the mountain as his assistant. He is described as his assistant from his youth in Numbers chapter 11 verse 28.

Numbers chapter 13 verse 16 tells us that Joshua's original name was Hosea and that Moses had renamed him Joshua. Moses then plays a role relative to Joshua that's similar to that of a father to a son.

[3 : 46] In Numbers chapter 27 verses 18 to 23, Joshua had been invested with some of Moses' own authority. Moses previously begged the Lord to let him enter into the land in chapter 3 verses 23 to 29.

And he was told that he would not enter, but rather that he would view the land from Pisgah as an alternative to entering. And I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand.

For what God is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yourself? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country in Lebanon.

But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, Enough from you. Do not speak to me of this matter again. Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward and look at it with your eyes.

For you shall not go over this Jordan, but charge Joshua and encourage and strengthen him. For he shall go over at the head of this people and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see.

[4 : 56] So we remained in the valley opposite Beth Peor. Why did Moses plead at this particular time? Had something happened that prompted him to do so? Well, earlier this chapter, Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had just entered into possession of their territory in the Transjordan.

The character of these tribes is interesting. They seem to be seen as both within and without the land. The promised land is presented as located on the far side of the Jordan, whereas much of Israel, these two and a half tribes, lived in the Transjordan.

In Numbers chapter 32, Moses was initially angry with the tribes of Reuben and Gad because rather than join the other tribes in going over and taking possession of land on the far side of the Jordan, their request for land in the Transjordan suggests that they're shrinking back from entering into the promise and discouraging their brothers from doing so.

However, that is not their purpose as it transpires and they are prepared to fight with their brothers to win the promised land and then to return to their own territory later. Ami Silva suggests that there is a connection between the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites and Moses' request to be allowed to enter the land.

The Reubenites and the Gadites were part of the nation but not within the land proper. If it is possible for tribes to remain outside of the land and yet still be part of the nation, why can't Moses, the great leader of the people, himself enter in?

[6 : 25] However, the destiny of Reuben and Gad being part of the nation yet settled just outside of the land is in some way a blessing that the Lord gives to Moses too. He ends up buried in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor, the same valley that's mentioned in Deuteronomy 3, verse 29.

He is buried outside the land but within a territory of his people. Let's take a small step back at this point. Why end the book of Deuteronomy with the story of the death of Moses and focusing upon his uniqueness?

He doesn't even enter into the land. Why have the final verse about Moses rather than about Joshua who's just been commissioned and will lead them into the land? Moses' death is foretold in chapter 32, verses 48-52.

That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession, and die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

For you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there into the land that I am giving to the people of Israel. These verses introducing the coming death of Moses hang over everything that follows.

[7 : 54] It's in this context that Moses delivers his blessing of the people of Israel, of each of the tribes, and then in the final chapter we see coming to pass what is foretold in those verses.

Emmanuel Shalev observes the expression that very day in verse 48 of chapter 32, which begins the statement about Moses' forthcoming death. It is not the most common expression, but almost every single time it occurs, it occurs at a critical juncture.

When Noah enters into the ark, when Abraham gets circumcised, when Israel leaves Egypt, when Israel eats the fruit of the land for the first time on the day after the Passover in the book of Joshua.

Each of these occasions represent a transition from one form of life to another. It's stepping over a threshold into something new. Something similar seems to be taking place here.

Moses' death is a transition from one state to another, not just for Moses himself, but for the entire people of Israel. In Numbers chapter 19 and 20, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron are presented in terms of the red heifer, a ritual that allows for those who have been held outside of the camp to enter in, and for Israel, that has been held outside of the promised land, to finally find admission.

[9 : 09] Moses' death, along with Aaron and Miriam's, is also a death that is required before Israel can enter into the land. As Moses dies, Israel can move on.

Moses was the great intermediary. His death represents the end of the period of Israel's infancy. He brought the law to the people. Israel does not need a hero to ascend to heaven to bring God's word down to them.

It does not need some great adventurer to cross fathomless oceans. With the gift of the law, the word is now on their mouths and in their hearts. And at this point, Moses is at risk of being in the way.

There are points when an intermediary can bring two people together by standing between them, but there are other points when an intermediary stands in the way, obstructing the way between two parties.

Israel had formerly been tempted to treat Moses as if a god, a lesser god under the greater god of the Lord. The removal of Moses as the intermediary at this point enables Israel to rise into a more mature adult relationship with the Lord as they enter into the promised land.

[10 : 16] Our passage declares that no other prophet like Moses has arisen in the land. This is in part in praise of his uniqueness. But it's also a declaration that Moses' purpose has been fulfilled.

It does not need to be repeated in the same way. To have another intermediary like Moses would be a step backwards. Moses is as a shoe that Israel has outgrown, a shoe that once enabled us to run, can after our feet have grown, leave us hobbling rather than sprinting.

The time for Moses and his sort of leadership is passing, and in his place Joshua must bring something rather different. The site of Moses' final resting place is also unknown.

As a servant, he had served his purpose. However, if his resting place were known, it could become a site of pilgrimage, a sort of cult of Moses could arise. The removal of Moses at this point then, and in the way that he is removed, prevents the servant from obstructing his master.

The book ends without the entry. Moses is on the tantalising brink of the promised land. His nose is, as it were, pressed up against the glass looking in. And the reader is left at this point too.

[11 : 25] The land is right before us, but it appears not as a secure possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge. At the end of Genesis, which is very similar to this, ending with blessings by Jacob, and then the death of Jacob and Joseph, the land is seen as a promise there too.

It's presented in terms of promise in the deposit of Jacob's body in the land, as an anticipation of Israel being brought back to the land, and in Joseph's statement concerning his bones being taken up with Israel and brought into the land.

The book ends looking towards the horizon, the horizon of the future, a horizon in which a cloud of divine promise can be seen in the very far distance. The book of Deuteronomy also ends with looking at a horizon.

The horizon here is more immediate. Moses is physically seeing the land, but even this visible horizon is one that's only truly seen with the eyes of faith. Though right before us, the land appears not as a secured possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge, the way it's been presented throughout the book of Deuteronomy.

Even when in the land, Israel would have to recognize that they still must stand, as if with Moses, just outside of the land looking in. Their possession of the land is always a promise.

[12 : 42] It's always an unfinished and yet-to-be-realized reality, depending upon their fellowship with and faithfulness to the Lord. And on historical occasions, such as the ministry of John the Baptist, Israel is called to go outside of the land, to stand on the far side of the Jordan once again, to recognize that even when they are in the land, in the promised territory, they have not yet fully entered into possession of it.

A question to consider. In Deuteronomy chapter 18, verses 15 to 19, Moses declares, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers.

It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him, and whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

Earlier on in the book of Deuteronomy then, we are told that the Lord would raise up a prophet like Moses. At the very end of the book, we read that no prophet like Moses had arisen. We also discuss the way that a prophet like Moses could rather than standing between the Lord and his people in a way that brought the two closer together, could actually serve to obstruct the maturer relationship that Israel was supposed to enter into.

[14:16] How then could a prophet like Moses arise without causing this problem?