



Deuteronomy - Chapter Thirty Three

VI Deuteronomy 31:1-34:12 Succession of Leadership (continues)

VI.c Deuteronomy 32:48-33:29 - The Blessing of Moses (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Three

In the manner of a patriarch, Moses gives a blessing on the whole nation of Israel, with a word of encouragement for each of the twelve tribes.

There is no mention of Simeon in the list of tribes, perhaps because the tribe was going to be dispersed: <<*Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel*>> (Genesis 49:7), being absorbed by Judah. The blessings are bracketed by statements praising God's uniqueness (vv.1-5 and vv.26-29).

VI.c.ii Deuteronomy 33:1-29 - Moses' Final Blessing on Israel

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death.

Deuteronomy 33:1

The title the man of God shows the high esteem in which Moses was held: <<*Then the people of Judah came to Joshua at Gilgal; and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, 'You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God in Kadesh-barnea concerning you and me'*>> (Joshua 14:6). The term is most frequently used in the OT of Elijah and Elisha, although Paul also uses it in reference to Timothy: <<*But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good*

fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses>> (1 Timothy 6:11-12).

As he looked at Israel with a shepherd's heart, he could not leave them without blessing them. It must be this way. Moses could not leave this earth without a final blessing on the people he has loved and served in the Lord for these past forty years. This chapter is similar in its effect to the blessing of Jacob upon his twelve sons as recorded in Genesis Chapter 49. Since Moses was the one who recorded that blessing of Israel, it is not a stretch to think he consciously modelled his blessing on Jacob's previous one.

² He said:

The Lord came from Sinai,
and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran.
With him were myriads of holy ones;
at his right, a host of his own.

Deuteronomy 33:2

In Deuteronomy, Sinai is usually called Horeb and was the mountain of God where he appeared to his people. Moses provides images of God's glory in revealing himself and his Word to Israel: he shone forth, with him were myriads of holy ones. This adds a sense of drama and grandeur to Moses' prophetic words to each tribe.

Seir is another name for Edom, in whose territory Sinai was situated: <<*Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel*>> (Judges 5:4-5), and Mount Paran was in the same vicinity: <<*These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan – in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab. (By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-barnea from Horeb)*>> (Deuteronomy 1:1-2).

Myriads of holy ones refers to angels or heavenly beings who accompany God and serve him faithfully in all they do: <<*A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened*>> (Daniel 7:10), <<*And you shall flee by the valley of the Lord's mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you*

shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him>> (Zechariah 14:5), <<It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘See, the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him’>> (Jude 14-15), and: <<Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’>> (Revelation 5:10-12).

- ³ Indeed, O favourite among peoples,
all his holy ones were in your charge;
they marched at your heels,
accepted direction from you.
- ⁴ Moses charged us with the law,
as a possession for the assembly of Jacob.
- ⁵ There arose a king in Jeshurun,
when the leaders of the people assembled –
the united tribes of Israel.

Deuteronomy 33:3-5

There arose a king in Jeshurun. The real king of Israel is God, despite the later development of a monarchy. Ultimately, Jesus will arise within the nation: <<*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious*>> (Isaiah 11:10). Paul, quoting this verse from the Septuagint writes: <<*and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope’*>> (Romans 15:12).

Jeshurun is another name for Israel: <<*Jacob ate his fill; Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation*>> (Deuteronomy 32:15), where it is used sarcastically.

When the leaders of the people assembled refers to the covenant renewal in the land of Moab.

⁶ May Reuben live, and not die out,
even though his numbers are few.

Deuteronomy 33:6

May Reuben live. Reuben was the eldest son of Jacob, and hence is listed first, as he is in Genesis 49:3. This is a general blessing for the tribe of Reuben.

And not die out, even though his numbers are few. This tepid blessing is in line with Jacob's prophecy concerning the tribe of Reuben: <<***Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your father's bed; then you defiled it – you went up on to my couch!***>> (Genesis 49:4). The tribe of Reuben never did excel; as far as is known no prophet, judge, or king ever came from the tribe of Reuben.

⁷ And this he said of Judah:

O Lord, give heed to Judah,
and bring him to his people;
strengthen his hands for him,
and be a help against his adversaries.

Deuteronomy 33:7

O Lord, give heed to Judah. Since the name Judah means praise, Moses prayed that the Lord would hear the voice of praise. He is also asked to listen to them for all the good kings and the Messiah would come from this tribe.

Strengthen his hands for him. Essentially, Moses prayed for the blessing and sustaining of the tribe of Judah, no doubt until it could fulfil its prophetic destiny to bring forth the Messiah. Moses knew this destiny for the tribe of Judah from Jacob's prophecy: <<***The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his***>> (Genesis 49:10).

⁸ And of Levi he said:

Give to Levi your Thummim,
and your Urim to your loyal one,
whom you tested at Massah,
with whom you contended at the waters of Meribah;

⁹ who said of his father and mother,

'I regard them not';
he ignored his kin,
and did not acknowledge his children.

For they observed your word,
and kept your covenant.

¹⁰ They teach Jacob your ordinances,
and Israel your law;
they place incense before you,
and whole burnt-offerings on your altar.

¹¹ Bless, O Lord, his substance,
and accept the work of his hands;
crush the loins of his adversaries,
of those that hate him, so that they do not rise again.

Deuteronomy 33:8-11

The Thummim and Urim were possibly two flat stones, like two-sided dice, used to determine divine guidance through a simple right or wrong, yes or no answer: <<*In the breastpiece of judgement you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before the Lord; thus Aaron shall bear the judgement of the Israelites on his heart before the Lord continually*>> (Exodus 28:30).

Whom you tested at Massah. Massah, also called Meribah, was the place where the Israelites first complained about a lack of water: <<*He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'*>> (Exodus 17:7). *Massah* means test and *Meribah* means 'to quarrel.'

Who said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'. Levi and his brother Simeon slaughtered the male inhabitants of Shechem after their prince Hamor had raped Levi's sister Dinah, bringing trouble upon the family. Refer to Genesis Chapter 34.

For they observed your word, and kept your covenant. Because of this, Levi had a blessed place among the tribes of Israel. Moses prayed that the substance of Levi would be blessed and that their enemies would be defeated. The prophecy: <<*I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel*>> (Genesis 49:7b) was

given to both the tribes of Simeon and Levi. For the tribe of Levi it was a blessing, as they were scattered throughout the nation to minister to the people and to bring God's Word to the whole nation. For the tribe of Simeon, the scattering was a significant curse; they are not even mentioned among the tribes being blessed here. This blessing of Levi also acknowledges the tribe's righteousness in the golden calf incident; refer to Exodus 32:26-29.

The two main roles of the priestly tribe of Levi were to teach the law: <<*Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. Moses commanded them: 'Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing*>> (Deuteronomy 31:9-11), and to oversee the sacrificial system.

¹² Of Benjamin he said:

The beloved of the Lord rests in safety –
the High God surrounds him all day long –
the beloved rests between his shoulders.

Deuteronomy 33:12

The beloved of the Lord. The place of special love and blessing Benjamin had would be prophetically fulfilled in a Benjaminite city becoming the centre of the nation - Jerusalem.

The beloved rests between his shoulders. Thus, although the tribe of Benjamin was indeed fierce and warlike (Jacob's prophecy described Benjamin as a ravenous wolf in Genesis 49:27), the tribe was greatly beloved of the Lord.

The tribe of Benjamin had a troubled history and nearly became extinct. However, they survived and from them came the first chosen king of Israel: <<*Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years*>> (Acts 13:21), and later the apostle Paul: <<*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*>> (Philippians 3:4b-6).

¹³ And of Joseph he said:

Blessed by the Lord be his land,

with the choice gifts of heaven above,
and of the deep that lies beneath;
14 with the choice fruits of the sun,
and the rich yield of the months;
15 with the finest produce of the ancient mountains,
and the abundance of the everlasting hills;
16 with the choice gifts of the earth and its fullness,
and the favour of the one who dwells on Sinai.
Let these come on the head of Joseph,
on the brow of the prince among his brothers.
17 A firstborn bull – majesty is his!
His horns are the horns of a wild ox;
with them he gores the peoples,
driving them to the ends of the earth;
such are the myriads of Ephraim,
such the thousands of Manasseh.

Deuteronomy 33:13-17

Joseph here includes the two tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, who received acceptance from their grandfather Jacob: <<*Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are*>> (Genesis 48:5). Jacob included them both in his patriarchal blessing: <<*The blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers*>> (Genesis 49:26). The two tribes of Joseph - Ephraim and Manasseh - were indeed blessed numerically in Israel. The descendants of this one son among twelve sons of Jacob were far more numerous than all the other tribes.

Who dwells on Sinai. It was on the mountain of God that Moses first encountered the Lord in the Burning Bush; refer to Exodus 3:1-6.

Such are the myriads of Ephraim, such the thousands of Manasseh. This fulfilled Jacob's prophecy: <<*Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall*>> (Genesis 49:22).

¹⁸ And of Zebulun he said:

Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out;
and Issachar, in your tents.

¹⁹ They call peoples to the mountain;
there they offer the right sacrifices;
for they suck the affluence of the seas
and the hidden treasures of the sand.

Deuteronomy 33:18-19

For they suck the affluence of the seas. Both the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar were in the region of Galilee and were blessed to take advantage of the abundance of food provided by the Sea of Galilee.

The hidden treasures of the sand. This is consistent with what Jacob said of Zebulun: <<*Zebulun shall settle at the shore of the sea*>> (Genesis 49:13a). However, Jacob's prophecy continues: <<*he shall be a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon*>> (Genesis 49:13b), indicating that their land allocation should have had access to the Mediterranean Sea, which it never did.

²⁰ And of Gad he said:

Blessed be the enlargement of Gad!
Gad lives like a lion;
he tears at arm and scalp.

²¹ He chose the best for himself,
for there a commander's allotment was reserved;
he came at the head of the people,
he executed the justice of the Lord,
and his ordinances for Israel.

Deuteronomy 33:20-21

Gad lives like a lion. The lion-like character of the tribe of Gad was shown by the fact that Gad furnished many fine troops for David: <<*These Gadites were*

officers of the army, the least equal to a hundred and the greatest to a thousand>> (1 Chronicles 12:14). This is in fulfilment of Jacob's words: <<*Gad shall be raided by raiders, but he shall raid at their heels*>> (Genesis 49:19).

He chose the best for himself. Gad, Reuben and a half tribe of Manasseh had requested land east of the Jordan that was ideal for cattle; the account of this is recorded in Numbers 32:1-5.

²² And of Dan he said:

Dan is a lion's whelp
that leaps forth from Bashan.

Deuteronomy 33:22

Dan is a lion's whelp. Jacob prophesied these same words over Judah: <<*Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up?*>> (Genesis 49:9). For Jacob, this was an indication that from Judah would come leadership and kingship. This does not seem to be the case with Moses as indicated in the comments below.

That leaps forth from Bashan. This may not be a complimentary phrase. History records that Dan was a troublesome tribe. They were the tribe to introduce idolatry into Israel: <<*Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves*>> (Judges 18:30a); Jeroboam set up one of his idolatrous golden calves in Dan in 1 Kings 12:26-30, and later Dan became a centre of idol worship in Israel: <<*Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, 'As your god lives, O Dan', and, 'As the way of Beer-sheba lives' – they shall fall, and never rise again*>> (Amos 8:14). Indeed, Jacob said of Dan: <<*Dan shall be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backwards*>> (Genesis 49:17).

The tribe of Dan originally was allotted land in the southern part of Israel, but migrated to the north hundreds of years after this; refer to Judges Chapter 18. Moses' reference to Bashan, a region in northern Israel, prophetically anticipated this migration.

²³ And of Naphtali he said:

O Naphtali, sated with favour,
full of the blessing of the Lord,
possess the west and the south.

Deuteronomy 33:23

O Naphtali, sated with favour. The tribe of Naphtali was indeed satisfied with favour. Naphtali's land was in a key portion near the Sea of Galilee, the region where Jesus did much of his teaching and ministry. No wonder Moses says this tribe is full of the blessing of the Lord, and that Jacob said: <<*Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears lovely fawns*>> (Genesis 49:21).

Possess the west and the south. Naphtali's land bordered the Sea of Galilee.

²⁴ And of Asher he said:

Most blessed of sons be Asher;
may he be the favourite of his brothers,
and may he dip his foot in oil.

²⁵ Your bars are iron and bronze;
and as your days, so is your strength.

Deuteronomy 33:24-25

Most blessed of sons be Asher. The abundance of the tribe of Asher was also expressed by Jacob: <<*Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall provide royal delicacies*>> (Genesis 49:20).

May he dip his foot in oil. Olive oil was a symbol of wealth.

²⁶ There is none like God, O Jeshurun,
who rides through the heavens to your help,
majestic through the skies.

²⁷ He subdues the ancient gods,
shatters the forces of old;
he drove out the enemy before you,
and said, 'Destroy!'

²⁸ So Israel lives in safety,
untroubled is Jacob's abode
in a land of grain and wine,
where the heavens drop down dew.

²⁹ 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 on their backs.

Deuteronomy 33:26-29

There is none like God. What blessing God bestowed on Israel! As Paul wrote: <<*For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God*>> (Romans 3:2b). The true greatness of Israel is the same as the greatness of the Christian - not in and of themselves, but in their God.

As stated earlier in v.5, Jeshurun is another name for Israel.

Who rides through the heavens to your help. God is great and uses his greatness on behalf of his people, upholding them with the everlasting arms, as David also states: <<*He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind*>> (Psalm 18:10). Christians are a people saved by the Lord, which means that God is for them and heaven is on their side: <<*If God is for us, who is against us?*>> (Romans 8:31b).

Happy are you, O Israel! Most translations have this as blessed. Happiness is a transient human emotion whereas a blessing will always remain on the faithful.

The shield of your help. God promised to be a shield for Abram: <<*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'*>> (Genesis 15:1). It is part of the full armour of God: <<*With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one*>> (Ephesians 6:16).