

**PART SIX**  
**MOSES' BLESSING & DEATH**  
**DEUTERONOMY 32:48 – 34:12**

Moses is to die on Mount Nebo

**<sup>48</sup>On that very day YHWH addressed Moses as follows: <sup>49</sup>“Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; <sup>50</sup>you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; <sup>51</sup>because both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites. <sup>52</sup>Although you may view the land from a distance, you shall not enter it—the land that I am giving to the Israelites.”**

These verses are from a different hand. They are full of expressions that are frequently found in writings of the Priestly School, but are not found elsewhere in Deuteronomy. They seem to have been added by the same members of the Priestly School who were responsible for the Book of Numbers, where we read:

YHWH said to Moses, “Go up this mountain of the Abarim range, and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarrelled with me. You did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters.” (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)

– Numbers 27:12-14

Mount Nebo is part of the mountains of Abarim (see Numbers 33:47). In verse forty-nine the land is spoken of as being given as a ‘possession’. The idea is found in Deuteronomy, but not the term *’aḥuzzâ*, though it is found elsewhere in the Torah 38 times. Deuteronomy uses *naḥ<sup>al</sup>lâ* (4:38). ‘Gathered to your kin’ (32:50) is also part of the vocabulary of the Priestly School (see Numbers 20:24, 26).

It is also in the Book of Numbers that we find recounted the scene referred to here in verses fifty-one and fifty-two as the reason why Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land:

Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with YHWH, and by which he showed his holiness.

– Numbers 20:10-13

There is nothing typically Deuteronomic about chapter thirty-three. Those responsible for the final editing of the Torah included this poem here for, unlike the comparable ‘blessing’ of Jacob (Genesis 49) it has something positive to say, and only positive things to say, about every tribe. An analysis of the content indicates that it is composed by someone from the Joseph tribes of the central highlands. It is also composed after the tribe of Simeon has been absorbed into Judah (Simeon is not listed), and when the tribe of Dan had left the district bordering on Philistia and settled in the far north near Mount Hermon. The short blessing given to Judah indicates that Judah is separate from Israel, which occurred on the death of Solomon. In Transjordan, Reuben is losing ground and Gad is the strongest of the Transjordan tribes. Putting all these indications together, the most likely period in which the poem could have been written is in the ninth or the first half of the eighth century BC.

## Introduction (33:1-5)

**<sup>1</sup>This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. <sup>2</sup>He said:**

**YHWH came from Sinai,  
and dawned from Seir upon us;  
he shone forth from Mount Paran.**

The mountain is always called ‘Horeb’ in Deuteronomy, not Sinai. ‘Seir’ is a mountainous region of Edom (see 2:1). Paran is a wilderness area, south of Judah and west of Edom. Kadesh-barnea (1:2) is an oasis in this wilderness. Compare Habakkuk:

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.  
His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.  
The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand,  
where his power lay hidden.

– Habakkuk 3:3-4

**With him were myriads of holy ones;  
at his right, a host of his own.  
<sup>3</sup>Indeed, O favourite among peoples,  
all his holy ones were in your charge;  
they marched at your heels,  
accepted direction from you.**

After the heavy accent on Israel’s infidelity and the dire warnings in the previous chapters, it is refreshing to have Israel reminded again that it is YHWH’s ‘favourite among people’: ‘He set his heart on you and chose you ... he loved you’ (7:7-8). Before stating the blessing given to the individual tribes, the poet is looking at Israel as one people, a united community. The text of verse three is disturbed, but it seems to be saying that God has willed that the whole of his heavenly host is there to care for Israel.

**<sup>4</sup>Moses charged us with the law,  
as a possession for the assembly of Jacob.**

The ‘law’ (tôrâ) is a possession for the ‘assembly’ (qāhāl) of Jacob. A key element of their unity is their obedience to the one Torah.

**<sup>5</sup>There arose a king in Jeshurun,  
when the leaders of the people assembled —  
the united tribes of Israel.**

‘Jeshurun’ is a term of endearment (see commentary on 32:15). YHWH is king of ‘the united tribes of Israel’. He is the source of all blessings for them.

Tribe 1. Reuben (33:6; contrast Genesis 49:3-4)

**<sup>6</sup>May Reuben live, and not die out,  
even though his numbers are few.**

Reuben is Jacob’s first-born. Their territory is in Transjordan (see 3:12). According to the stele of Mesha, king of Moab (mid ninth century BC), the Moabite kingdom had expanded north of the Arnon River, which would have encroached on Reuben’s territory. Hence the hope expressed in this blessing.

Tribe 2. Simeon (see Genesis 49:5-7)

No blessing is offered to Simeon. The Simeon tribe were allotted territory near Beer-sheba, but, as noted earlier, were absorbed into the Judah tribe. The most plausible reason for their being omitted here is that they no longer existed as an independent tribe at the time of writing.

Tribe 3. Judah (33:7; contrast Genesis 49:8-12)

**<sup>7</sup>And this he said of Judah:**

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

As noted earlier, this poem is written from the perspective of the northern kingdom of Israel. After the death of Solomon, Judah was a separate kingdom, a weakened state, and something of a backwater in comparison to its more prosperous and powerful northern neighbour. The poet is praying for reunion.

Tribe 4. Levi (33:8-11; contrast Genesis 49:5-7)

**<sup>8</sup>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.**

The Urim and the Thummim were carried in the priest’s breastplate (see Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8). They seem to have been used to discover a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer to a question addressed to God. Proverbs 16:33 seems to be referring to their use: ‘The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is YHWH’s alone.’ The Levites are described as ‘loyal’ (ḥāsîd) because of what happened at Massah and Meribah. They are not mentioned in the accounts of Exodus 17:1-7 or Numbers 20:1-13. Is the poet drawing on a different version, or is he allowing himself some poetic licence?

**<sup>9</sup>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.**

The reference here is to the scene after the golden calf, when they sided with Moses (Exodus 32:27-29), and killed those responsible, even their brother, friend or neighbour.

**<sup>10</sup>They teach Jacob your ordinances,  
 and Israel your law;  
 they place incense before you,  
 and whole burnt offerings on your altar.**

Two key responsibilities of the priests are outlined here. They are to adjudicate according to the Torah (see 17:10), of which they are the official guardians. The verb translated 'teach' here is *yārâ*, the verbal root of Torah. They are also to minister at the altar in the cult. Writing probably in the first half of the fifth century BC, the prophet Malachi offers us a perspective in what was expected of the priests:

Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says YHWH of hosts. My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of YHWH of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says YHWH of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

– Malachi 2:4-9

**<sup>11</sup>Bless, YHWH, 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.**

Tribe 5. Benjamin (33:12; contrast Genesis 49:27)

**<sup>12</sup>Of Benjamin he said:**

**The beloved of YHWH rests in safety —  
 the High God surrounds him all day long —  
 the beloved rests between his shoulders.**

This is an exceptionally beautiful, though brief, blessing for Jacob's youngest son from his favourite wife, Rachel. This is possibly because Benjamin is closest to Joseph, traditionally his only full brother. He is 'beloved' (*yādîd*). Benjamin is bordered on the south by the Jerusalem temple and on the north by the sanctuary of Bethel.

Tribe 6. Joseph (33:13-17; compare Genesis 49:22-26)

Here in Deuteronomy, as well as in the list of Jacob's blessings in Genesis, it is the tribe of Joseph that receives the most elaborate blessing. Presumably both poems originated in the Joseph tribal area. Since the Bible as we have it was produced in Judah, it is necessary to remember that apart from the half-century of the reigns of David and Solomon, 'Israel' primarily referred to the more populous and prosperous area north of Jerusalem. Before the collapse of the north in 721BC, it was Judah, not the north, that was out in the cold. And the tribe that easily dominated the north was Joseph which occupied the hill country of Samaria. The Joseph tribe was divided into Ephraim and Manasseh (33:17).

<sup>13</sup>**And of Joseph he said:**

**Blessed by YHWH be his land,  
with the choice gifts of heaven above,  
and of the deep that lies beneath;  
<sup>14</sup>with the choice fruits of the sun,  
and the rich yield of the months;  
<sup>15</sup>with the finest produce of the ancient mountains,  
and the abundance of the everlasting hills;  
<sup>16</sup>with the choice gifts of the earth and its fullness,  
and the favor of the one who dwells on Sinai.  
Let these come on the head of Joseph,  
on the brow of the prince among his brothers.  
<sup>17</sup>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.**

Tribes 7 & 8. Zebulun and Issachar (33:18-19; compare Genesis 49:13-15)

<sup>18</sup>**And of Zebulun he said:**

**Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out;  
and Issachar, in your tents.  
<sup>19</sup>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.**

Zebulun and Issachar occupy western Galilee. The fact that they border on the Mediterranean gave them ready contact with Phoenicia and access to sea trade.

Tribe 9. Gad (33:20-21; compare Genesis 49:19)

<sup>20</sup>**And of Gad he said:**

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

<sup>21</sup>**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 YHWH,  
and his ordinances for Israel.**

Prior to the invasion of the Assyrian Tiglath-pileser in 734BC, Gad kept expanding its territory in Gilead, in central Transjordan. This poem must antedate that invasion.

Tribe 10. Dan (33:22; compare Genesis 49:16-17)

<sup>22</sup>**And of Dan he said:**

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

Dan is already settled in northern Galilee with the territory of Bashan on its eastern border. The Genesis blessing text also portrays Dan as formidable warriors.

Tribe 11. Naphtali (33:23; compare Genesis 49:21)

<sup>23</sup>**And of Naphtali he said:**

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

Naphtali occupies the highland plateau of northern Galilee and sweeps right down to the Sea of Galilee.

Tribe 12. Asher (33:24-25; compare Genesis 49:20)

<sup>24</sup>**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.**

<sup>25</sup>**Your bars are iron and bronze;  
and as your days, so is your strength.**

Asher dwelt in the fertile land of west Galilee, noted for its vines and olive trees.

## Conclusion

### Conclusion to Moses' Blessings

With the blessings of each tribe completed, the conclusion links back with the introduction (33:1-5). The focus is the one united people, called here again by the affection name 'Jeshurun'(see 33:5). In verses twenty-six to twenty-eight we marvel: 'there is none like God'(33:26) as we recall his majesty and what he has done for his people. In verse twenty-nine we marvel: 'who is like Israel, a people saved by YHWH'.

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

**<sup>27</sup>He subdues the ancient gods,  
shatters the forces of old;  
he drove out the enemy before you,  
and said, "Destroy!"**

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

**<sup>29</sup>Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,  
a people saved by YHWH,  
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.**

Mount Nebo is part of the Moab Plateau which is some 3,000 feet above the Jordan valley. It is separated from the main plateau by erosion.

In an idealised scene, Moses is portrayed as looking over the whole of the Promised Land. The view from Mount Nebo is extensive, but one cannot see the full extent of the land.

Moses, the servant of YHWH (see 3:24) dies and is buried, 'but no one knows the burial place to this day' (34:6). Moses lived a complete life of 120 years (see 31:2).

With his death the Exodus generation is over. There is a new beginning with Joshua, whom we are told is 'full of wisdom' (34:9). This is a practical gift – in his case of leadership. For it to be true wisdom, however, the decisions are to flow from a listening to YHWH.

Deuteronomy concludes with a eulogy of Moses, whom 'YHWH knew face to face' (34:10; see 5:4) – a knowledge of unique intimacy. Perhaps Paul puts it best: 'one who loves God is known by him' (1 Corinthians 8:3).

YHWH used to speak to Moses  
face to face, as one speaks to a  
friend.

– Exodus 33:11

With Moses I speak face to face ...  
and he beholds the form of YHWH

– Numbers 12:8

With the death of Moses the Torah is complete. The Deuteronomists seem also to be expressing a longing, for Moses had said that YHWH would raise up a prophet like me (see Deuteronomy 18:5). There had been prophets, but never one 'like Moses'. The disciples of Jesus recognised him as that prophet.

**<sup>1</sup>Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and YHWH showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, <sup>2</sup>all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, <sup>3</sup>the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar.**

**<sup>4</sup>YHWH said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."**

**<sup>5</sup>Then Moses, the servant of YHWH, died there in the land of Moab, at YHWH'S command. <sup>6</sup>He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. <sup>7</sup>Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated.**

**<sup>8</sup>The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.**

**<sup>9</sup>Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as YHWH had commanded Moses.**

**<sup>10</sup>Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom YHWH knew face to face. <sup>11</sup>He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that YHWH sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, <sup>12</sup>and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.**