

Moses' last words to Israel

7. Blessings for Zebulun and Issachar

David Green

Deuteronomy 33

- v. 18. Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out,
And Issachar in your tents!
- v. 19. They shall call the peoples to the
mountain;
There they shall offer sacrifices of
righteousness;
For they shall partake of the abun-
dance of the seas
And of treasures hidden in the sand.*

THIS BRIEF BLESSING of two verses covers the two tribes Zebulun and Issachar. In the days of the restoration of the nation of Israel they will hold adjacent territories, as they did under the distribution of the land by Joshua. Then they inherited an area in the district of Galilee (Josh. 19:10-23; Mt. 4:13), but in the future their inheritance will be well south of Jerusalem (Ezek. 48:26-28). Jacob's blessing, like Moses', links Zebulun with the seacoast: "Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall adjoin Sidon" (Gen. 49:13).¹

This presents no problem when applying Moses' blessing to the age to come, as all tribal inheritances border the Mediterranean Sea. The matter is not so clear with regard to the past, as some authorities, on the basis of Joshua 19:10-23, consider Zebulun and Issachar to have been landlocked with no access to the Mediterranean.²

In your going out and in your tents

Zebulun and Issachar will be happy and prosperous in their activities, both at home and when travelling abroad. More usually in Scripture a person's 'going out' is coupled with his 'coming in', and refers to activities which take him away from home. David's military activities are so described in 1 Samuel 29:6 and 2 Samuel 3:25. The words of the psalmist provide another good example for the use of this expression: "The LORD shall preserve *thy going out and thy coming in* from this time forth, and even for evermore"

(Ps. 121:8, AV). In the case of these two tribes, they would have available the richly fertile Plain of Esdraelon in the territory of Issachar as a thoroughfare, allowing relatively easy travel both east to west and north to south.

It appears that the first two lines of this blessing connect with the meanings of the two names Zebulun and Issachar but in a reverse manner. The name Zebulun suggests dwelling and rest, here applied to Issachar, while Issachar has the meaning of hire and labour, which is applied to Zebulun. This tends to confirm the interpretation that "going out" refers to work and "in your tents" refers to resting from labour at home. An alternative interpretation limits the 'going out' to Zebulun, applying it to trading, and suggests that 'in your tents' refers just to Issachar staying at home and being occupied with farming activities.

Tents were the type of living accommodation used at the time Moses was speaking, and the use of the word 'tents' to describe the homes of the Israelites was quite common in later times. Perhaps this later usage derives from the long period of forty years spent by the Israelites dwelling in tents in the wilderness. On certain occasions we read that every man went to his tent, probably meaning that they went home (1 Kgs. 8:66; 2 Chron. 25:22). The children of Israel, delivered from Syrian oppression, "dwelt in their tents, as beforetime" (2 Kgs. 13:5, AV). Zechariah tells us that the "tents" of Judah will be saved first (12:7). The settling of the children of Israel in the Promised Land is also referred to as dwelling in tents: "He [God] cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel *to dwell in their tents*" (Ps. 78:55, AV).

* All quotations are from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

1. For an interesting explanation of Jacob's prophecy regarding Zebulun see *The Christadelphian*, Jul. 1996, pp. 246-8.
2. See, for example, *The Westminster Smaller Bible Atlas*, edited by F. Wright and F. Wilson, SCM Press, 1947.

The riches of sea and sand

In Deuteronomy 33:19 there is a parallelism between the two phrases “the abundance of the seas” and “treasures hidden in the sand”. Since the sand of the seashore seldom contains much of great value, the second of these phrases might well be a poetic way of expressing the same meaning as the first.

If the references to “seas” and “sand” were to be understood literally, the “abundance” and “treasure” would refer to the quantity and value of goods resulting from fishing and trading activities. This blessing would indicate the availability of coastal ports in Zebulun and Issachar’s territories, a point commented on above. The fact that the Hebrew has “seas” in the plural suggests trading ventures into other areas rather than fishing in the locality.

Those who look to the past history of these two tribes for a fulfilment of Moses’ words see it, at least in part, in the manufacture of glass from sand and purple dye from shellfish. It is on record that glass articles were made from the sands of the River Belus,³ which descends from the hills of Galilee and enters the Mediterranean sea at Acre (Akko, Ptolemais). Tacitus wrote: “The River Belus falls into the Jewish sea, about whose mouth those sands, mixed with nitre,⁴ are collected, out of which glass is formed”.⁵ The Murex shellfish used to manufacture purple dye were also to be found in the region of the Bay of Acre.

Jonathan ben Uzziel in his Targum wrote concerning this blessing: “From the sand are produced looking glasses and glass in general; the treasure—the method of finding and working this—was revealed to these tribes”.⁶ His comment regarding the manufacture of purple dye was: “They dwell by the side of the Great Sea, they are nourished with (its) dainties; and they take the shellfish, and dye with its blood, in purple, the threads of their vestments”.⁷

Figurative meaning

A figurative application, where sea and sand refer to those Gentile nations that submit to Jesus, is supported by various prophecies in Isaiah:

“Behold, I will extend peace to her [Jerusalem] like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream” (66:12);

“the *abundance of the sea* shall be turned to you, the *wealth of the Gentiles* shall come to you” (60:5);

“You shall drink the milk of the Gentiles, and milk the breast of kings” (v. 16).

These prophecies apply to Israel as a whole, but they may also have particular relevance to Zebulun and Issachar. A possible reason for this would be the availability of harbours where people from all nations can disembark when visiting Jerusalem to worship the Lord of hosts (Zech. 14:16; Isa. 2:2,3). Perhaps members of these tribes will also own and run the ships which bring some of the Gentile pilgrims to Israel.

An alternative view is that “your going out” in verse 18 of Moses’ blessing refers to the second exodus, a going out from among the Gentile nations (Isa. 11:11-16).⁸ This does not seem likely, taking into account the parallelism present in the two lines of verse 18. If, however, this view is accepted, the abundant treasures are those collected from the Gentile peoples when this second exodus takes place, in much the same way as at the first exodus Israel spoiled the Egyptians (Ex. 12:36).

Calling the peoples to the mountain

The AV translation ‘people’ (singular) in verse 19 of the blessing is incorrect, the word being the plural ‘peoples’. So who are these ‘peoples’? There are two ways of interpreting it. Firstly, it can be taken as referring to the people of the tribes of Israel, with the plural being used to emphasise their great number and the fact that each tribe was a people in its own right. Alternatively, it can refer to the Gentile nations. In the first case the prophecy may relate to the past history of Israel, whereas, if the Gentile nations are intended, its fulfilment must be in the millennial age.

In his passage about the “house of prayer for all nations” Isaiah introduces the subject of Gentile involvement in worship in the age to come,

3. Mentioned in Joshua 19:26, under the name “the Brook Shihor Libnath”, as being on the border of the territory of Asher.
4. By nitre is meant sodium carbonate, used for making soda glass. This was obtained chiefly from the soda lakes of Lower Egypt, according to the *New Bible Dictionary*, IVP, p. 826, third edition, 1996.
5. Tacitus, *History*, 1. v., c. 7, quoted in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*.
6. Quoted in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*. Targums are Jewish commentaries on Scripture.
7. Quoted in the *SPCK Commentary of the Old Testament*.
8. *Jacob and Samuel: Founders of a Nation*, p. 125, J. P. Taylor, Dawn Christadelphians, 1991.

and he uses the same word as that which should be translated 'peoples' in Deuteronomy 33:19:

"Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant— even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations [literally all the *peoples*]. The LORD God, Who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, 'Yet I will gather to him others besides those who are gathered to him'" (56:6-8).

The psalmist also speaks of this time: "So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth Your glory . . . to declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem, when the *peoples* are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD" (102:15,21,22). This part of the blessing for Zebulun and Issachar appears to confirm the view, already expressed, that those tribes will be associated with the pilgrims from other nations visiting Jerusalem on a yearly basis. They will not only bring them, but also call upon them to fulfil their yearly obligation by coming "up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob" (Isa. 2:3).

Past fulfilment

If a past fulfilment is to be looked for, it is necessary to decide which mountain is intended. In his song commemorating the destruction of the Egyptian host in the Red Sea, Moses speaks of the mountain of God's inheritance, the sanctuary of the Lord: "Thou shalt bring them [the people of Israel] in, and plant them in *the mountain* of Thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which Thou hast made for Thee to dwell in, in *the Sanctuary*, O LORD, which Thy hands have established" (Ex. 15:17, AV). This clearly refers to Solomon's temple built on Mount Moriah at Jerusalem (2 Chron. 3:1), the city chosen by God for His Name to be there (6:6).

If it is Mount Moriah that is intended, it is difficult to see what particular past connection there has been with the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun calling the people of Israel to worship. A passage in 2 Chronicles (30:11,18) has been quoted as illustrating this blessing, but there it is Hezekiah and the princes of Judah who issued

the invitation to worship. The fact that many of Issachar and Zebulun responded to that invitation does not fit the terms of the blessing.

Mount Tabor is the only other possibility for "the mountain", it being on the boundaries of the three tribes Zebulun, Issachar and Naphtali (Josh. 19:12,22,34). It was a gathering place in time of war, for it was at Mount Tabor that Barak mustered his force of ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun when going to fight against Jabin king of Canaan (Judg. 4:6; 5:18). He was also supported by the princes of Issachar (5:15).

This mountain is named in Scripture as being important (Ps. 89:12; Jer. 46:18) and is known to have been a place of worship, as were so many 'high places' during Israel's history before the Babylonian captivity. However, the only worship connected with Tabor in the Bible is idolatrous worship, and then only a single mention, in which the idolatrous priests of Issachar are spoken of as spreading a net for the people of Israel on Tabor (Hos. 5:1). This is quite the opposite of the "sacrifices of righteousness" referred to in the blessing. Perhaps an altar was built there to Yahweh before the spread of idolatry. It has been commented that Tabor was well fitted for festive assemblies, and that the *Midrash Galkat* on verse 19 states that, apart from the express revelation regarding Mount Moriah, the temple would have been built on Mount Tabor because of this prophecy.⁹

Sacrifices of righteousness

The blessing speaks of "sacrifices of righteousness" being offered on the mountain by the "peoples" called to worship by Zebulun and Issachar. "Sacrifices of righteousness" is a phrase used by David in at least two of his psalms: "Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the LORD" (4:5); and: "Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness" (51:18,19). Sacrifices of righteousness are sacrifices acceptable to God because those who offer them seek to manifest righteousness in their lives. They are offerings made in the right spirit and offered with the right attitude of mind.

(To be continued)

9. Main text and footnotes p. 351, *Sinai and Palestine*, A. P. Stanley, John Murray, 1858.