

Moses: earth's meekest man

35. Last things

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Moses was pre-eminently the shepherd of his people. Caring for them, sacrificing himself for them, he has led them to the edge of the Promised Land. Not permitted to enter the Land himself, he presents Joshua as the next leader selected by God. Then, before he takes his leave of them, he solemnly warns them of their covenant responsibilities, which, depending on their behaviour, would yield either blessing or cursing.

ASIDE FROM the annihilation of the Midianites as the Lord had commanded, the final months of Moses' life were very much taken up with his concern for the welfare of his people as they entered the Promised Land. First, a kind of seal had to be set on the nation after the completion of the wilderness journey by the taking of a census of all the males who had survived it. From the census two notable facts emerged. The first was that the number of males aged twenty years old and upwards was almost the same as the number counted at the last census, taken at Sinai thirty-eight-and-a-half years previously. The second was that not one of the previous generation of similar maturity who had refused to enter the Land at Kadesh Barnea had survived the wanderings in the wilderness, as God had decreed. Nevertheless, the wholesomeness of the people under the leadership of Moses, the servant of God, bore testimony to the faithfulness with which he had completed his charge.

Unable to enter the Land

But now the time had come for his own 'exodus' from the land of the living. He could not enter the Kingdom of God in its imperfect state with its imperfect people; that entry had to await a "Prophet . . . like unto" him, yet greater. Even so, Moses' disappointment at not being allowed to enter the Land alongside the people he had shepherded for so long must have been great. He had been willing to lay down his life for them—even to the point of extinction. And it had been on

account of his inappropriate response to their delinquency that, despite his pleadings, he was to be denied entry, as he himself recorded:

"I pleaded with the LORD: 'O Sovereign LORD, You have begun to show to Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works You do? Let me go over and see the good

land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon.' But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. 'That is enough,' the LORD said. 'Do not speak to Me any more about this matter'" (Deut. 3:23-26*).

Behind it all, of course, there were spiritual as well as personal reasons why Moses could not lead God's people into the Promised Land. As Israel's receiver and presenter of a Law that made nothing perfect, he, being like all other men unable fully to keep it, could not represent the Perfect One to come who alone would be able to save to the uttermost those who would come to God by him. Israel needed a 'Joshua' or 'Saviour' to do that.

And it was in recognition of Israel's immediate need and in his love for them all that Moses accepted Yahweh's decision, and asked God to provide a worthy successor to himself who would take over the leadership. "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the LORD'S people will not be like sheep without a shepherd", he said (Num. 27:16,17).

Authorising Moses' successor

So the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your

* Quotations from the NIV except where stated otherwise.

hand on him. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so that the whole Israelite community will obey him. He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in" (vv. 18-21).

This commission, which Moses did not hesitate to perform, was but one of several preparations Moses made for the welfare of his people. Indeed, some of them ranged far ahead into the future, making him the incomparable prophet the nation of Israel has turned to throughout their history; for what Moses said to them became not just law but truth itself.

Sadly, Moses was under no illusions as to both the sin-prone propensities of the children of Israel and the course their history would take. He assembled all the people and went over God's dealings with them and their own conduct since they departed from Egypt. Then he repeated the Law, and he gave the most solemn exhortations and warnings regarding disobedience of it in a series of addresses delivered in the plains of Moab. In the first of these he recapitulated the chief events of the last forty years in the wilderness, making an especial point of their rebellion in Kadesh Barnea that had so prolonged their journey: "You grumbled in your tents and said, 'The LORD hates us; so He brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us . . .' Then I said to you, 'Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them . . .' In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God, Who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go'" (Deut. 1:27-33).

For his second address, Moses summoned all Israel to give them a solemn reiteration of the Law. "Hear, O Israel, the decrees and the laws I declare in your hearing today", he said. "Learn them and be sure to follow them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain . . . And He said: 'I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me . . .'"—and so on through the ten

commandments that enshrined the spirit of the whole Law, which was to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God (Deut. 5:1-21). That spirit was reduced to its very essence later on when Moses said, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (6:5), which, when combined with "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), comprised the two greatest commandments of all (Mt. 22:37-39).

Blessing and cursing

The third address Moses chose not only to give but also to have the children of Israel solemnly enact on two mountains when they crossed the Jordan and entered the Land. Six tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, and six on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses, to which all the people were solemnly to say, "Amen". The blessings that would come to the people for obeying God would set them high above all the nations of the earth, but, contrariwise, great and terrible would be the consequences of disobedience. Only eleven verses of Deuteronomy 28 are required to cover the blessings, bountiful as they are; but fifty-two verses of curses that, alas, have come true in the history of the children of Israel, and most notably in the lifetime of some of our readers, then make the most distressful reading. One can almost hear the sighings and groanings of concentration-camp victims in the words, "in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see" (Deut. 28:67, AV)!

The sad tragedy of God's chosen people since the Exodus has been their perennial unwillingness to obey Yahweh's commands and decrees that Moses set out for them in "this law" which he then wrote down and delivered to the Levites who kept the ark of the covenant. "At the end of every seven years . . .", he said, "during the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing" (Deut. 31:10,11).

The song of witness

Joshua had already been commissioned by Moses with the laying on of his hands before Eleazar and the whole assembly, but now was the time for it to be confirmed unmistakably by Yahweh Himself. The Lord said to Moses, "Now the day

of your death is near. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the Tent of Meeting, where I will commission him" (v. 14). So Moses and Joshua came and presented themselves. Then the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood over the entrance to the tent. And the Lord said to Moses, "You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake Me and break the covenant I made with them. On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide My face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?' And I will certainly hide My face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods. Now write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites and make them sing it, so that it may be a witness for Me against them" (vv. 16-19).

Thus, in majestic language, in what became known as the Song of Moses, was portrayed, not

only the inevitable waywardness of the nation, but also the impregnable Rock of the Almighty, Who would judge His people and have compassion on His servants. "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day", said Moses. "They are not just idle words for you—they are your life" (32:46,47). It was a song so powerful in its implications that it will be sung at the resurrection of the just, alongside the Song of the Lamb, when all nations shall rejoice with his people, singing:

"Great and marvellous are Your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are Your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear You, O Lord,
and bring glory to Your name?
For You alone are holy.
All nations will come and
worship before You,
for Your righteous acts have
been revealed" (Rev. 15:3,4; cf. Deut. 32:43).

[\(To be concluded\)](#)