

New series

Moses' last words to Israel

1. Moses' introduction to his blessings (Part 1)

David Green

THE LAST recorded words of Moses are those with which he blessed the tribes of Israel: "Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death" (Deut. 33:1*). This is the first time the description "the man of God" is used for one of God's prophets, although later on it occurs frequently, being applied particularly to Elijah and Elisha.

A different description is used for Moses in the next chapter, where he is called "the servant of the LORD [Yahweh]" (v. 5). This title, which equates with God's description, "My servant

lar poetic expression is used in Psalm 50: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, *God will shine forth*" (v. 2). One scholar suggests that the rays of the rising sun shine upon and reflect from Mount Paran (possibly a prominent peak in the mountain range on the west shore of the Gulf of Aqaba¹) and also on Seir, the mountainous area of Edom.² The direction indicated by the rising sun would be approximately the same as the direction of travel for the Israelites in making their way to the Land of Promise.

When both Deborah and David praised God for the greatness of His power (see Table 1) they

Table 1	
Deborah—Judges 5:4,5	David—Psalm 68:7,8
LORD, when You went out from Seir, When You marched from the field of Edom, The earth trembled and the heavens poured, The clouds also poured water; The mountains gushed before the LORD, This Sinai, before the LORD God of Israel.	O God, when You went out before Your people, When You marched through the wilderness, <i>Selah</i> The earth shook; The heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel.

Moses" (Num. 12:7), is used of him a total of seventeen times. Joshua (Josh. 24:29; Judg. 2:8) and David (titles of Psalms 18 and 36) are the only other persons accorded the description 'the servant of Yahweh' in the Old Testament. All those who are servants of the Lord are equally men of God.

Each section of this exposition of Moses' last words in Deuteronomy 33 will be introduced with the relevant verses quoted from the New King James Version.

v. 2 The LORD came from Sinai,
And dawned on them from Seir;
He shone forth from Mount Paran,
And He came with ten thousands of saints;
From His right hand
Came a fiery law for them.

Yahweh came from Sinai

The theophany on Mount Sinai appears to be described in terms of a glorious sunrise. A simi-

spoke of Him leading the advancing tribes of Israel to the Land of Promise. The angel of God's presence (Isa. 63:9) led the host of Israel, and this was symbolised by the pillar of cloud that was fire by night showing the way (Num. 9:17,21), and the ark of God's strength (Ps. 132:8) being carried to the fore by the priests (Num. 10:33-35).

Perhaps the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:2 are intended to imply progress towards the Land of Promise. This is indeed suggested by the AV, which reads, "The LORD *came from* Sinai . . . He *came* with ten thousands of saints". If we

* All quotations are from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

1. *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 870, third edition, IVP, 1996. *Speaker's Commentary* identifies Mount Paran with the range that forms the northern boundary of the desert of Sinai.
2. *Old Testament Commentary* Vol. 2, edited by C. J. Ellicott.

understand “from Mount Paran” and “from Seir” in this sense, then it would appear to fit in with the route by which the people of Israel reached the plains of Moab (Num. 33:48) preparatory to crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. The Israelites entered the Wilderness of Paran after leaving the Wilderness of Sinai (Num. 10:12; 12:16), and reached the border of Edom (Seir) after leaving Kadesh, which was situated in the Wilderness of Paran (13:26; 33:37). The passage in Habakkuk’s prayer (3:3,4), which is very similar to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:2 (see Table 2), lends support to this idea, though it refers to Teman, a district of Edom, rather than to Seir.

If the reading ‘with’ is preferred, the myriads of holy ones in the days of Moses would be the great host of Israelites being led by God through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. They could be called ‘saints’ or ‘holy ones’ because they had been set apart from the other nations (Ex. 33:16) and called to be God’s holy people (Lev. 11:44,45). They are also described as “His saints” in the following verse in Deuteronomy 33 (v. 3).

Not all commentators are happy with the rendering, “ten thousands of saints”. For example, Adam Clarke describes the AV rendering as “a most unnatural and forced construction”. The problem arises from the fact that the Hebrew

Deuteronomy 33:2	Habakkuk 3:3,4
The LORD came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came with ten thousands of saints; From His right hand Came a fiery law for them.	God came from Teman, The Holy One from Mount Paran. <i>Selah</i> His glory covered the heavens, And the earth was full of His praise. His brightness was like the light; He had rays flashing from His hand, And there His power was hidden.

He came with ten thousands of saints

The AV and several other versions follow the Septuagint by using the word ‘with’ in the main text, but some give the Hebrew reading ‘from’ in marginal notes.³ Presumably the translators felt that ‘with’ makes more sense than ‘from’ when read in context. However, the RV correctly translates as in the Hebrew text, “and he came from the ten thousands of holy ones”.

Ellicott’s Commentary interprets the Hebrew as meaning that the “holy ones” are the angelic host and that God’s fiery law came from the holy ones and from God’s right hand to the people of Israel. He suggests that this agrees with Daniel 7:10: “A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him”. Compare the description of the number of angels given in the Apocalypse: “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands” (5:11). Another passage that fits this interpretation is found in Psalm 68: “The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands: the Lord has come from Sinai into His sanctuary” (v. 17, NIV).

word translated “saints” means ‘holiness’, as is pointed out in the marginal references of some versions.⁴ Since “myriads [ten thousands] of holiness” does not have a sensible meaning, “holy myriads” has been suggested.⁵ Other translators suggest emendations of the Hebrew text to read either “holy ones [saints]” or the place name Kadesh. Three examples of the latter view are set out in Table 3.

<i>Moffatt</i>	moving from Meribah-Kadesh
<i>Kennicott</i> ⁶	And He came from Meribah-Kadesh
<i>Jerusalem Bible</i>	For them He came, after the mustering at Kadesh

One reason for suggesting that Kadesh is being referred to by Moses is that the fiery appear-

3. For example, the NIV and NEB.

4. For example, the RV and NEB.

5. Prefatory remarks to *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* on verse 2 by Thornley Smith.

6. Quoted in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* on Deuteronomy 33.

ance of the glory of the Lord was seen there (Num. 20:6) as it was at Sinai (Ex. 19:18; 20:18; Lev. 9:23), Paran (Num. 14:10) and possibly Seir (Judg. 5:4).⁷ On the other hand, the Israelites

with this part of the verse is apparent when the different versions are compared. A number of versions that avoid the translation “fiery law” or its equivalent are set out in Table 4.

Table 4	
<i>New English Bible</i>	streaming along at His right hand
<i>Revised Version margin</i>	at His right hand were streams for them
<i>Revised Standard Version</i>	with flaming fire at His right hand
<i>New International Version</i>	from the south, from His mountain slopes
<i>Jerusalem Bible</i>	from His zenith as far as the foothills
<i>Moffatt</i>	blazing in fire from the south

The problem in translation arises from the Hebrew *eshdath*, which, according to the Massorettes, should be pronounced as the two separate words *esh dath*. The word *dath* is an Aramaic word meaning ‘law’ that is only found elsewhere in the Old Testament in the post-exilic writings Esther, Ezra and Daniel, while the usual word for ‘law’ in the Pentateuch is *torah*. The Samari-

were led at all times by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Num. 14:14) to show them the way to go (Deut. 1:33). Therefore these places could be mentioned merely because they represented important stages on the way to the Promised Land.

tan version reads *esh ur*, ‘a fire shining out’, resulting in the translation, “from his right hand a fire shone forth upon them”. This matches quite well the corresponding passage in Habakkuk 3 (see Table 2): “He had rays flashing from His hand” (v. 4).

(To be continued)

A fiery law from God’s right hand

The fiery appearance of the glory of the Lord has already been referred to in the previous paragraph. But why does verse 2 describe the law as being fiery? That the translators find a problem

7. The glory of the Lord also appeared to Israel in the Wilderness of Sin (Ex. 16:10) and at the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16:19,42).

Thus were finished the words of Moses. His farewells had been said. He had looked upon the people and they had looked upon him. He would be remembered through thousands of years for the law of the Lord which he gave to them. Now he turned away and looked at the hills of Moab as he stood upon the plain. So he climbed for the last time on his earthly pilgrimage a mountain at the command of the Lord. It is not recorded that anyone accompanied him on that last journey. So many times he had been alone with God: it was fitting that he should now go alone to meet Him in another form. He climbed mount Nebo. At the top he turned and looked toward the land. The Lord guided his eyes and showed him all that kingdom in a moment of time. He looked upon the green Jordan valley and saw the pleasant land of Gilead, and right beyond in the north the furthestmost point where Dan would seek to extend its inheritance. Then his eyes swept through the coastal regions and so down to Judah and right down to the south country, even to the Dead Sea, and the places nearby like Zoar. His circuit was complete. God had shown him the land of promise but he could go no further. Jericho lay not far away but he would not hear the shout of Israel and the fall of the city. “And the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither”.

“Moses My Servant”, the late Harry Tennant, pp. 191-2, The Christadelphian, 1966.

Among the many aspects of his work for the Brotherhood, Brother Harry Tennant, who sadly fell asleep on 31 May, contributed a number of thoughtful articles to Testimony Special Issues.