

Moses' last words to Israel

10. Moses' concluding psalm

David Green

Deuteronomy 33

- v. 26. There is no one like the God of
Jeshurun,
Who rides the heavens to help you,
And in His excellency on the clouds.
- v. 27. The eternal God is your refuge,
And underneath are the everlasting
arms;
He will thrust out the enemy from
before you,
And will say, 'Destroy!'
- v. 28. Then Israel shall dwell in safety,
The fountain of Jacob alone,
In a land of grain and new wine;
His heavens shall also drop dew.
- v. 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 majesty!
Your enemies shall submit to you,
And you shall tread down their high
places.*

God rides the heavens

VERSE 26 IS a poetic description of God coming in His majesty (excellency) to the help of His people, styled "Jeshurun", meaning 'Upright One'.¹ Similar language is used elsewhere in Scripture. The psalmist speaks of the Lord making the clouds His chariot and walking upon the wings of the wind (Ps. 104:3; cf. 18:10; Isa. 19:1). Again in another psalm we read: "O sing praises unto the Lord . . . to Him That rideth upon *the heavens of heavens*, which were of old . . . Ascribe ye strength unto God: His excellency is over Israel, and his strength is in the *clouds*" (Ps. 68:32-34, AV; cf. v. 4). If 'heavens' and 'clouds' are to be taken literally, this graphic language expresses God's immeasurable greatness, which is far above the level of the power of any human opposition.

On the other hand, 'heavens' and 'clouds' are frequently used figuratively in the Bible, so perhaps the reference is to God being in control of the clouds of angels, "the clouds of heaven" (Dan.

7:13), who are forwarding His purpose on the earth. There appears to be this association of ideas in Psalm 104 mentioned above: ". . . Who makes the clouds His chariot . . . Who makes His angels spirits" (vv. 3,4). In the age to come the heavens of Israel will be Christ and a great cloud of saints manifesting the glory of God, for God "has not put the world to come . . . in subjection to angels" (Heb. 2:5). These will be God's horses and chariots of salvation: "You rode on Your horses, Your chariots of salvation" (Hab. 3:8).

The eternal God a refuge

The God of Israel is described in Deuteronomy 33:27 as "The eternal God" Who provides "refuge". The Hebrew word *qedem*, which is translated "eternal" only this once in the AV, means 'former' or 'aforetime', and so the Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase, "The God of old". The God of Israel has always been, and will always be, unlike the gods of the nations, which come and go.

Of old God had cared for Israel's fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and He had cared for them up to the time that Moses was speaking: "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself" (Ex. 19:4); "in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old" (Isa. 63:9). That care and support would continue for the nation of Israel if only they would abide by the covenant that God had made with them. In the future, when Israel comes under the new covenant, that care, as of a father for the son he loves, will be assured forever. God is everlasting and His support and care are unfailing, for "underneath are the everlasting arms". Moses also brings out these aspects of the Most High in his psalms: "from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (90:2); and: "He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge" (91:4).

* All quotations are from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

1. See [Part 2](#), section "He was king in Jeshurun" ([Jul. 2004, p. 289](#)).

One very striking passage about the support that God gives to the godly, and the refuge that He provides for those who trust in Him, is the words of King David: “The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength [mg. my rock], in Whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower” (18:2, AV). Isaiah 26:4 calls upon the people of Israel to “Trust in the LORD forever, for in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength [mg. rock of ages]”.

Safety and security for Israel

The final part of Deuteronomy 33:27 speaks of God thrusting out the enemies of Israel from the inheritance that He has promised to them and devoting those enemies to destruction. In the first place this clearly refers to the Canaanites: “Understand therefore this day, that the LORD thy God is He Which goeth over before thee; as a consuming fire He shall destroy them, and He shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the LORD hath said unto thee” (9:3, AV). The verse also has a future application, for there are many enemies of Israel at present within the borders of the Promised Land, not to mention those who are yet to invade the Land under the leadership of Gog, that will need to be destroyed or driven out.

The first line of 33:28, “Israel then shall dwell in safety alone” (AV), connects with verse 27, for safety and security results from the destruction of all Israel’s enemies. In the past Israel experienced little safety in their land because of disobedience, and invading bands and armies frequently punished them. In contrast, the future age will be one of peace:

“Behold, the days are coming’, says the LORD, ‘that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely’” (Jer. 23:5,6);

“they shall no longer be a prey for the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and no one shall make them afraid” (Ezek. 34:28).

Dwelling “in safety *alone*” picks up Balaam’s prophecy: “lo, the people shall dwell *alone*” (Num. 23:9, AV). All the enemies of Israel will be “thrust out” (Deut. 33:27) of the Land and Israel will be able to “[dwell] without care . . . [with]

neither gates nor bars . . . [and] dwell alone” (Jer. 49:31, AV). Micah uses the adverb derived from the Hebrew word translated “alone” in Deuteronomy 33:28 in the same context of prosperity and security: “Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives *by itself* [AV, solitarily] in a forest, in fertile pasture-lands” (7:14, NIV).

The fountain of Jacob

To preserve the symmetry of the clauses in Deuteronomy 33:28 the word ‘alone’ should be attached to the second clause as in the NKJV translation “the fountain of Jacob alone”. The Hebrew word translated “fountain” means ‘eye’, but may mean “a fountain (as the eye of the landscape)”.² Sometimes the word is used in the phrase ‘fountain of water’, but on other occasions by itself. A good example showing both these uses is to be found in Genesis 16:7. Using the translation ‘eye’ is not meaningful in the context of Deuteronomy 33:28.

What is meant, then, by the phrase “the fountain of Jacob”? It reads as though it is parallel to “Israel” in the first clause. This is confirmed by an examination of Psalm 68:26: “Bless God in the congregations, the Lord, from the fountain of Israel”. Here the very similar phrase, “the fountain of Israel”, is in parallel with “the congregations” who bless God, though a different Hebrew word for fountain is used. Another passage makes a clear connection between the waters of Judah and the people of the house of Jacob: “Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters [wellsprings, NKJV] of Judah” (Isa. 48:1, AV). In these passages a fountain of water is being used as a figure for the multitude of Jacob’s descendants, his offspring.³

Prosperity and happiness for Israel

The last two lines of Deuteronomy 33:28 refer to the prosperity of a people who are truly God’s people: “. . . in a land of grain and new wine; his heavens shall also drop dew”. The blessings of God poured out on the people of His love are both physical and spiritual, as already discussed in the study of the blessing for Joseph (vv. 13-17).⁴ In the present passage Moses exclaims,

2. *Strong’s Concordance* definition for word 5869.

3. In a similar figure a fountain is used of a man’s wife (Prov. 5:15-18).

4. See [Part 6, Nov. 2004, p. 421](#).

“Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD . . . !” (v. 29).

This happiness of Israel results from the special favour that God has shown to them for the sake of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: “the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth . . . because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage” (7:6-8). Many great things God had already done on behalf of Israel, and all the great things spoken about in these last words of Moses He will do in order to fulfil His promises.

Moses asks the Israelites the rhetorical question, “Who is like you?”. Clearly the answer is that no other people or nation has ever been treated by God in this way: “For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard” (4:32). But to Israel these things were shown because God loved their fathers and chose them, driving out greater and mightier nations to give them their land as an inheritance (vv. 35-38).

Israel’s sword and shield

In Deuteronomy 33:29 Moses describes the Lord as “the shield of your help and the sword of your majesty”. In the days of their faithfulness God not only protected His people from those who attacked them but also destroyed their enemies with the sword of warfare. He was both a defence to His people and a warrior fighting on their behalf. So also in the future, when Jesus manifests Yahweh in the earth, “The LORD shall go forth like a mighty man; He shall stir up His zeal like a man of war. He shall cry out, yes, shout aloud; He shall prevail against His enemies” (Isa. 42:13); and again: “the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle” (Zech. 14:3). The aspects of defence and offence both come together in the words of Joel 3:16: “The LORD also will roar from Zion . . . but the LORD will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel”.

Returning to Deuteronomy 33:29, the “sword of your [Israel’s] majesty [excellency, AV]” becomes “your glorious sword” in the NIV. An

alternative translation is “whose sword is thine excellency”.⁵ God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, are the glory and excellency of Israel in the age to come.

The submission of Israel’s enemies

In the NKJV the penultimate line of verse 29 reads, “Your enemies shall *submit* to you”. The AV reading is, “thine enemies shall be *found liars* unto thee”, with the marginal reading, “shall be *subdued*”. In a sense the enemies of Israel will be found liars because their claim that Israel will never possess the full extent of the Land of Promise will have been shown to be false. According to *Strong’s Concordance*, the basic meaning of the Hebrew is to be untrue in word or deed, hence to lie, submit or cringe.

The same Hebrew word is used in Psalms 18:44 and 66:3. The latter verse reads: “Say unto God, How terrible art Thou in Thy works! through the greatness of Thy power shall thine enemies *submit* themselves unto Thee” (AV). Psalm 18 is clearly Messianic, King David being a type of Christ. The relevant passage reads: “You have delivered me from the strivings of the people; You have made me the head of the nations; a people I have not known shall serve me. As soon as they hear of me they obey me; the foreigners *submit* [mg. feign submission] to me” (vv. 43,44). The marginal rendering “feign submission”, AV “feign obedience”, is not acceptable because it does not imply that absolute submission which will be the case when Jesus establishes his authority over all the earth: “Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little” (2:10-12).

High places trodden down

The final line of Deuteronomy 33 informs us that Israel will “tread down” the “high places” of their enemies. “High places” translates the single Hebrew word *bamah*. In fact this word is translated ‘high place(s)’ in 101 out of its 103 occurrences in the AV. In at least eighty of these passages it refers to a place of worship, usually pagan. In other passages it refers to a height or a lofty spot. Both uses are found in Micah 1:3,5: “For, behold, the LORD cometh forth out of His place, and will come down, and tread upon the

5. Adam Clarke’s commentary.

Reuben	Israel revives and multiplies
Judah	The nation calls for help and is saved
Levi	Restoration of priesthood—the nation learns righteousness
Benjamin	Loved by God and dwelling safely
Joseph	Increase in prosperity—the great Prince reigns
Zebulun/ Issachar	Second Exodus—resettlement—enrichment
Gad	Commencement of world conquest
Dan	A lionlike attack on Gentile nations
Naphtali	God's blessing ensures possession of the Promised Land
Asher	Premier world position for Israel that cannot be taken from them. ⁸

high places of the earth . . . What is the transgression of Jacob? is it not Samaria? and what are the *high places* of Judah? are they not Jerusalem?" (AV).

'Treading on the heights' is an idiomatic expression conveying "the notion of possessing key terrain and thus signifies 'being in firm control'".⁶ These high places would be fortresses, strongholds and commanding positions that were easily defended, being in inaccessible places. King David, when he had subdued all his enemies, said: "He [God] maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places" (Ps. 18:33, AV). In this he typified the Messiah. At present, enemies possess some of the high places of Israel, particularly the Temple Mount, saying, "Aha, even the ancient high places are ours in possession" (Ezek. 36:2, AV).

However, the Lord Jesus will take control of not only the high places of Israel but also those of all the nations of the earth, thus treading down the high places of Israel's enemies. The promise of God to the house of Jacob when they turn from their iniquities is: "I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father" (Isa. 58:14, AV; cf. Deut. 32:13,14). Riding upon the high places of the earth would have a similar meaning to treading upon the high places.

Conclusion and exhortation

Moses' blessings on the tribes of Israel appear to touch in some small way on their past history. However, for a complete and absolute fulfilment

we must look to the future, to "the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21). The fullness of these blessings relates to the period which will see the return of the Lord Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on this earth.

Reference has already been made to the suggestion that a progression may be detected in the order in which the blessings were given, which fits in with the sequence of events leading up to the establishment of the Kingdom of God throughout the earth.⁷ The suggested sequence is set out in brief in the box to the left.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification, and there may be rather more overlap between the blessings than the above scheme would suggest.

An exhortation for us

The exposition of any part of the Holy Scriptures is lacking value if it does not have a spiritually positive effect on our life in Christ: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16,17). So how does the present study help us in that way? A number of points come to mind:

- 1 Our attention is directed away from the futile things that the present world has to offer to the wonderful things of the future, where there will be untold blessings for spiritual Israel as well as for natural Israel.
- 2 We are reminded that the present age, the times of the Gentiles, is soon coming to an end, to be replaced by the heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells. Since we hope to be found faithful servants when our Master returns, we aim at greater commitment and fuller obedience as we wait for that great day to arrive.
- 3 Such a study provides many lines of thought, suitable for meditation and discussion, with which to fill our minds in place of the frivolous and unpleasant things that tend to occupy the attention of worldly people.

6. Page 113, Vol. 1, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Press.

7. See "Blessing in place of cursing", [Part 3, Aug. 2004, p. 328](#).

8. Page 121, *Jacob and Samuel*, J. P. Taylor, Dawn Christadelphians, 1991.

4 A study such as this illustrates the marvelous way in which all the books of the Bible are knit together into a unity by common themes and expressions. The more we study the Word of God and observe these intricate

connections between the different parts of the Scriptures, the greater our faith in the promises of God and the greater our resistance to the attractions of this world.

(Concluded)