

Moses' last words to Israel

5. The blessing of Levi

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Deuteronomy 33

- v. 8** And of Levi he said:
 "Let Your Thummim and Your Urim
 be with Your holy one,
 Whom You tested at Massah,
 And with whom You contended at the
 waters of Meribah,
- v. 9** Who says of his father and mother,
 'I have not seen them';
 Nor did he acknowledge his brothers,
 Or know his own children;
 For they have observed Your word
 And kept Your covenant.
- v. 10** They shall teach Jacob Your judgments,
 And Israel Your law.
 They shall put incense before You,
 And a whole burnt sacrifice on Your
 altar.
- v. 11** Bless his substance, LORD,
 And accept the work of his hands;
 Strike the loins of those who rise
 against him,
 And of those who hate him, that they
 rise not again".*

God's holy one

THE BLESSING for Levi is couched in the form of a petition to God, Who is referred to by the pronouns 'You' and 'Your' in verses 8, 9 and 10. The pronouns 'he' and 'his' in verses 9 and 11 relate to God's "holy one", and 'they' in verses 9 and 10 to the Levites. The tribe of Levi was a *holy* tribe because the Levites had been separated from the other tribes to the service of God in place of the Israelite first-born:

"I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting" (Num. 8:18,19);

"At that time the LORD separated [mg. set apart] the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the

LORD to minister to Him and to bless in His name" (Deut. 10:8; cf. Num. 16:9,10).

From the tribe of Levi, Aaron was set apart to be the high priest, so becoming the first of a line of 'holy ones' who wore the breastplate of judgment wherein were placed the Urim and the Thummim.

In fact the Hebrew word *chasid*, translated "holy one" in verse 8, does not carry the sense of separation as does the word used in the phrase, "the Holy One from Mount Paran" (Hab. 3:3). The most common translation for *chasid* in the AV is 'saint' (nineteen times), but its essential meaning is that of 'kindness' (Hebrew *chesed*). It is used of those who practise kindness in their lives and who are recipients of God's loving kindness. On this basis a suitable translation would be "godly one" rather than "holy one".

The Urim and the Thummim

God instructed Moses to put "the Urim and the Thummim" ("Lights and Perfections" according to the margin) "in the breastplate of judgment" so that they would be upon Aaron's heart when he went before the Lord. In this way he would "bear the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the LORD continually" (Ex. 28:30). The high priest when wearing the breastplate would be able to provide Divine guidance for those who came to him to enquire of the LORD. By means of the Urim and Thummim the perfect truth of God's judgements and decisions regarding the tribes of Israel would be obtained from the high priest. For this reason the breastplate was later known as the *Essen*, a Greek word signifying 'oracle'.¹

Joshua was required to ask counsel of Eleazar the son of Aaron, who succeeded his father as high priest: "And he [Joshua] shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD" (Num. 27:21, AV). The Septuagint version of

* All quotations are from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

1. Whiston's *Josephus, Antiquities*, iii. vii. 5.

1 Samuel 14:41,42 says that Saul used the Urim and Thummim to decide on the guilt of Jonathan (see the NEB translation and compare verses 18,19). Enquiring of the Lord by the Urim and Thummim was clearly different from prophecy (1 Sam. 28:6), and there are various suggestions about its mode of operation, but a discussion of these is outside the scope of this study.²

Massah and Meribah

Massah (Tempted) and Meribah (Contention) are the two names given by Moses to a place in the wilderness called Rephidim where the children of Israel murmured against God because they lacked water, as recorded in Exodus 17:7: "So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the *contention* of the children of Israel [with Moses, v. 2], and because they *tempted* [tested] the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" It was here that Moses provided water for the Israelites by striking the rock with his rod (v. 6).

There was, however, another Meribah, another place of contention, which involved both Moses and Aaron. This was Meribah Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin (Deut. 32:51). Here Moses and Aaron sinned in failing to honour God in the sight of the people, when Moses "spoke rashly with his lips" (Ps. 106:33) and struck the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 20:2-13). Though God was not hallowed by the behaviour of Moses and Aaron, He was hallowed in the sight of Israel by excluding Moses and Aaron from the Land of Promise (vv. 12,13).

What God allows to happen to an individual is in a sense what God does to that person. Hence in this unpleasant event at the waters of Meribah God tested His holy ones, Moses and Aaron, and contended with them because they dishonoured Him.

Levi's faithfulness

The second verse of Moses' blessing on the tribe of Levi (Deut. 33:9) describes the faithfulness of the Levites at times of great unfaithfulness when the Israelites were turning to idolatry. Because of this faithfulness on the part of the Levites, Jacob's curse of being divided and scattered in Israel (Gen. 49:7) was turned into a blessing.

At the time of the idolatry of the golden calf, the tribe of Levi put God before concerns of friendship and family relationships, and followed the instruction to "slay every man *his brother*, and every man *his companion*, and every man *his*

neighbour . . . Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon *his son*, and upon *his brother*; that He may bestow upon you a blessing this day" (Ex. 32:27,29, AV). The blessing bestowed upon Levi for this act of faithfulness was that the Levites were chosen for the service of the tabernacle in place of the first-born of the other tribes (Num. 3:6-13; 8:16-18).

The reference to father, mother, brothers and children in Deuteronomy 33:9 has a further application. The position of high priest was one of great honour, but also of great responsibilities and very high standards. Aaron was not allowed to mourn the death of his two sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:6,7). The high priest was not allowed to go near any dead body, even his father or his mother, nor be involved in any mourning for the dead (21:10,11). In order to maintain his holiness and separation he had to repudiate his family relationships on such occasions.

A blessing also came to Levi through the priestly line because of the zeal of Phinehas at the time of Israel being joined to Baal of Peor (Num. 25:7-11). God made with him a "covenant of peace" (v. 12), described in verse 13 as "a covenant of an everlasting priesthood". Malachi refers to this covenant: "My covenant was with him [Levi], one of life and peace, and I gave them to him that he might fear Me; so he feared Me and was reverent before My name" (2:5). In these two ways the tribe of Levi observed God's word and kept His covenant (Deut. 33:9). This covenant had been made prior to the episode of the golden calf, being recorded in Exodus 24, which says that Moses read "the Book of the Covenant" to all the people, and they replied, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient" (v. 7).

Teachers in Israel

Verse 10 refers to two aspects of the duties accorded to the tribe of Levi for their faithfulness in keeping God's covenant. There was their involvement in religious activities associated with worship on the one hand, and their duty to instruct Israel in God's laws on the other. Malachi expresses the latter of these in the following passage: "For the lips of a priest should keep knowl-

2. 1 Samuel 23:9-12 and 30:7,8 suggest that David had access to the breastplate after Saul killed the priests (22:20,21). If so, how did Saul enquire by the Urim just before his last battle (28:6)?

edge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts" (2:7). As an example, the work of Ezra the scribe, a descendant of Aaron through Phinehas and Eleazar, comes to mind: "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). In another instance Jehoshaphat, in the third year of his reign, sent out priests and Levites to teach the people of Judah out of the Book of the Law (2 Chron. 17:8,9).

These responsibilities and duties have been taken away from Levi for the time being because of disobedience. However, as the blessings of Moses are prophetic of the time when there is to be a full restoration of the nation of Israel, a latter-day application should be looked for. This is confirmed by other prophecies. For example, Jeremiah speaks of the time when "Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely" (33:16), and goes on to say: "nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually" (v. 18). In the book of Ezekiel we also read of work for Levites in the age to come (44:10-31), and the prophet Isaiah says that God will take from amongst those brought back out of all nations "for priests and Levites" (66:20,21).

A Messianic application

Since the Levitical high priest foreshadowed in his ministrations the work of Jesus, it is to be expected that the greater fulfilment of Moses' words is to be found in him, who wore the breastplate of righteousness (Isa. 59:17). This "Holy One" (Acts 3:14) is the brightness of God's glory (Heb. 1:3) and able to judge with perfect righteousness (Isa. 11:2-4), and so he is the one represented by the Urim (lights) and the Thummim (perfections or fulnesses) of the high priest's breastplate: "For in him dwells all the *fullness* of the Godhead bodily; and you are *complete in him*, who is the head of all principality and power" (Col. 2:9,10). These words of Paul to the Colossians remind us that the application of Moses' blessing is also to all that are members of the body of which Christ is the head. Like Christ, we need to put on the breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:14), and, like him, reflect the character of God in our lives.

The Apostle Paul pointed out that the rock struck by Moses at Rephidim (Ex. 17:6) was a

type of Christ providing the water of life through his sacrifice: "For they [the Israelites in the wilderness] drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). The Lord Jesus was severely tried (Massah) and suffered much contention (Meribah), particularly at the time of his trial and crucifixion. "He learned obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:8), and in the testing of that obedience he endured a great deal of "hostility from sinners" (12:3), in addition to the terrible sufferings involved in crucifixion.

The Lord Jesus did not acknowledge his mother and his brethren when they wanted him to desist from his Father's work (Mk. 3:31-35) because they thought that he was "out of his mind" (v. 21). His followers are also obliged to put their commitment to him above family relationships: "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time . . . and in the world to come eternal life" (10:29,30, AV).

A time of blessing

The last verse of the blessing for Levi, verse 11, speaks to us of the time yet future, when the tribe will be blessed in the Kingdom age and their service to God will be acceptable. We can also take the "his" of this verse as referring to God's "Holy One", Jesus, for God has accepted the sacrificial work of His beloved Son and blessed him with immortality and a position of great honour. There is also the blessing of the work Jesus accomplishes on God's behalf "in bringing many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10), as expressed in Isaiah 53:10: "he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand".

The verse concludes with a reference to the destruction of all those who hate God's people Israel and His beloved Son the Lord Jesus. Those who rejected Jesus will see his greatness without participating in it (Mt. 26:64; cf. Lk. 19:27), and all those who do not submit when called upon to accept Christ as the ruler of the world will suffer destruction (Ps. 2; Rev. 19:11-21). The loins or hips connect the legs to the body, and can be considered as the seat of a person's strength (Job 40:16; Nah. 2:1). To "strike the loins" of the enemies is a poetic way of describing the removal of their strength.

(To be continued)