

Israel in the Wilderness

Numbers and Deuteronomy

Numbers is made up of a collection of sources, some very ancient like the songs from the "Book of the Wars of the Lord" in chapter 21 and some very late, like the reconstruction of the camp in the desert in chapter 2.

The theme of the wilderness years is Israel's continual rebellion. In the end, they refused to enter the Promised Land when the time came and as a result a whole generation was excluded from the land. Yet God was determined to achieve his purpose despite their unfaithfulness. The forty years of wandering while the disobedient generation died out were also forty years of testing, during which God taught his people to trust in him (Deuteronomy 8:2-5) and finally brought them to the brink of the Promised Land once again.

Deuteronomy consists mainly of a codification of the Law made in the century before the reign of Josiah (641-609 B.C.). It begins with a look back at the wilderness wanderings and ends with a collection of appendices emphasising the importance of the covenant between God and Israel and, finally, the death of Moses. We will be reading the introduction and conclusion at this stage of 'Word of Life' but leaving Deuteronomy's codification of the Law until we reach the period of Josiah and Jeremiah.

Day 31. Psalm 87; Numbers 1 - 4

The Camp in the Desert

It is assumed that much of this passage will be read at speed because of the large amount of repetition and less important detail.

Psalm 87

A much later psalm extols Jerusalem as Israel's principle place of worship. Foreigners will be numbered among God's people and written down as "born in Jerusalem."

Numbers 1 - 4

The census recorded in chapter 1 gives the book of Numbers its title. The style and content of the passage reflect a passionate concern for exactitude, pattern, regularity and fine detail, which appears to have been a characteristic of the priestly mind in the centuries after the return from exile. For many people of the opposite temperament, the emphasis on order and plan may seem lifeless and suffocating, but it is a witness to this particular aspect of the character of God, who is a God of order as well as spontaneity, for whom every person matters, no detail is too trivial, and who has a plan and purpose for each one of us.

The camp in the wilderness is beautifully laid out as a perfect square. Each tribe has its appointed place, and each family group within the tribe. God dwells in the tabernacle, in the centre of his people. When the people are on the move, the tabernacle is still at the centre of the camp, surrounded by the fighting men, with their families.

Because of the holiness of the tabernacle it is surrounded by the priests and Levites and no one else may approach (3:38). The priests camp on the east side, in front of the entrance (3:38) and the Levites on the other three sides. By the time this passage was written, the Levites were debarred from sacrificing (see Ezekiel 44:10-16), and their role is to assist the priests and to serve the tabernacle. In a development of Exodus 13, they are now seen as taken from among the people in exchange for the first-born, who were spared at the Passover (3:5-13, 40-end). The first-born would be understood as holy, because their lives belonged to God, so the Levites become holy by taking their place. The loving attention to detail and precision is seen in the redemption money paid for the extra first-born (3:46-48).

Day 32. Psalm 106:4-12; Numbers 9 - 11

Leaving Sinai

Psalm 106:4-12

Israel remembers their faithlessness at the crossing of the Red Sea.

Numbers 9:1-14

The Passover was the first since leaving Egypt. It provides the occasion for a ruling about people who cannot celebrate because of uncleanness.

Numbers 9:15 - 10:end

As the Israelites travel through the desert, God sets the pace. Sometimes their progress is quick, sometimes slow. But always God is guiding and the people following at the pace he sets. This is a parable of the spiritual life. As Christians we need to follow God at the pace he sets without either lagging behind or trying to go too fast.

The mention of the trumpet signal for setting out is the occasion of rules on the use of trumpets for other occasions - war and festivals. The blowing of ram's horn trumpets is still part of Jewish ritual today.

The rules for the order of camping and setting out in 10:11-28 reflect the much more developed account in Numbers 1 - 4. Hobab (10:29) is an alternative name for Moses' father-in-law, who is called Reuel and Jethro in other passages (see Exodus 2:16-21; 3:1; 18:1). Verses 35 and 36 contain the fragments of a very ancient song.

Numbers 11

Life for the Israelites in the wilderness was not as attractive as either the life they had left in Egypt or that which they had been promised in Canaan, and they began to complain. They were also affected by the "rabble with them" (11:4, see Exodus 12:38), and Moses himself was affected by the grumbling of the Israelites. The Christian life too may have many hardships. The lives of those around us who do not follow Christ may appear superficially much more attractive. But here we are warned against the lack of faith which leads to grumbling, and this was a theme frequently echoed in the psalms (Psalm 106, see 1 Corinthians 10:1-13).

In early times, ecstatic prophesying was a sign of the Spirit of God having come upon a person (see 1 Samuel 10:5-13). Only exceptional people received the Spirit and then only for some particularly task. 11:29 looks forward to a time when all God's people will receive the Spirit, a hope fulfilled in Christ through the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (see Ezekiel 36:24-29; Joel 2:28-29; John 1:32-33, 7:37-39).

Moses' humility is an example to Christian leaders. It is important to guard against wanting to stay ahead of other people in Christian life and authority. A true Christian leader wants above all to see God's people grow to maturity (Colossians 1:28).

Day 33. Psalm 95; Numbers 12 – 14

Israel's Failure to Enter the Promised Land

Psalm 95

God is praised as the Creator and Saviour, the one who holds both the physical world and his people in his hand. This leads to a warning to reverence and obey him or risk forfeiting his blessing.

Numbers 12

The leader whose heart is in tune with God does not make a show of authority. He or she delights to see others growing in maturity and receiving God's gifts (Numbers 11:39). Moses was "humble": in other translations this word is translated "meek". Meekness is not weakness but submission to the will of God. Moses was a strong man whose strength was wholly given to God, and because he followed the Lord, the Lord insisted on others following him.

Numbers 13 - 14

The spies who went into the Promised Land came back with a report of both blessings and difficulties. But instead of praising God for the blessings and trusting him for the difficulties, Israel chose to balk at the difficulties and forget the blessings. The miracles God had done in saving them from Egypt should have been signs to them of God's ability to bring them into the land, but instead of having faith they put God to the test, demanding that he provide good things without obedience on their part. The Bible narrative does not express sympathy for Israel in their situation of danger; their refusal to face up to hardships is taken as rebellion. God will take into the promised land only a people with faith, and those who show no faith are condemned to stay in the wilderness.

Earlier in the story, at the crossing of the Red Sea, God had used Israel to display his glory, whereas they had been more concerned with their own good (Exodus 14:12,17). Although God does act with our good in mind, his ultimate purpose is to bring the whole creation back into a right relationship with him. God's people are caught up in a greater purpose than that of our own well-being.

In a similar way, Christians must face hardships on the way to our promised land (Acts 14:21-22; 1 Peter 4:12-14), and these are not to be taken as excuses to give in. To do so is to miss the blessings God has for us (1 Corinthians 10:1-13,

Hebrews 3:12 - 4:2). Unless we commit ourselves to God's purposes we will be likely to fail when persecution arises.

The terms of Moses' intercession (14:13-19) are not the people's welfare, but the glory of God. He refuses God's offer of glory for himself (14:12) in favour of God's good name. Like Abraham, who based his intercession on what he knew of God as a righteous Judge (Genesis 18:25), Moses bases his intercession on what he knew of God's character (14:18). The result of his prayers was to limit the extent of God's judgement on Israel.

Obedience at the wrong time is disobedience (14:41-end). God had made his decision and it was too late to change his mind.

Day 34. Psalm 106:13-23; Numbers 16 - 18

Korah's Rebellion

Psalm 106:13-23

Following on from their failure at the crossing of the Red Sea, Israel remembers their unfaithfulness in the wilderness.

Numbers 16 - 17

In these chapters, compiled from ancient material but at a much later date, two rebellions are interwoven. The first is that of Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, who came from the tribe of Levi. The second, the rebellion of Korah against Aaron, is a rebellion of the Levites, whose status was that of sanctuary helpers, against the special privileges of the priests, the family of Aaron. This is relevant to the situation in the period after the return from exile in Babylon. By that time a sharp distinction had arisen between priests and Levites, which was not the case in earlier times.

Despite the priesthood of all believers, the leaders of God's people carry a special burden and require the support and respect of the community (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:5).

Again Moses, this time joined by Aaron, intercedes for the people (16:20-24). His intercession saves the rest of the people from the fate of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. In the last few verses of chapter 16 is a duplicate of the Korah story and this time it is Aaron who intercedes successfully for the people, using the incense and fire from the altar which he and his family alone were allowed to tend.

The budding of Aaron's staff validates the claims of the tribe of Levi to special status. This time Aaron is the acknowledged leader and representative of the whole tribe.

Numbers 18

The story of how God vindicated the special status of the priests and the Levites respectively leads into an account of their privileges and again these reflect the practice of the period following the return from exile (there is an earlier account of the tithes in Deuteronomy 14:22-end).

The priests are set apart to take the risk of approaching the holy God. They and they alone are allowed to perform the rituals of the sanctuary and the Levites are set apart to serve them.

The priests are to be supported by their designated portions from the offerings brought by the people. The Levites are supported by the people's tithes and they themselves must give the best tenth of the tithes to the priests. Only when the tithes are presented does what God has given become common, fit for general use.

Day 35. Psalm 135; Numbers 20 - 21, 31

The Wars of the Lord

Psalm 135

A celebration of God's mighty acts of salvation.

Numbers 20 - 21, 31

Little is recorded of the Israelites' forty years stay in the wilderness. Some later compilers thought they stayed for most of the time at Kadesh (Deuteronomy 1:46), others that they spent it wandering. Chapters 20 and 21 take up the journey from Kadesh to the entry to the promised land.

One of the great difficulties of the Old Testament is its portrayal of a God who apparently cold-bloodedly orders the death of his enemies. In some places, the numbers of men, women and children killed is probably greatly exaggerated and chapter 31 is one of those. Nevertheless the central problem remains. Several points can be made:

- Life is not a right but a gift of God who creates us and who holds the life and death of each person in his hand.
- After the Flood it is made clear that every person deserves death, but God is patient in allowing life to continue on earth and gives laws by which human beings can live together in peace and safety (see notes on Genesis 9).
- God decides the times for judgement on individuals and nations (see notes on Genesis 18 and 19). In the case of the Canaanite nations, the entry of Israel to the promised land was also part of the judgement on the nations who lived there because of their abominable religious practices (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24-25, 20:22-23).
- It is God who controls the Israelites at war. He decides when and whether they will fight. Thus in chapters 20 and 21, they avoid fighting Edom and Moab, but fight Arad, Sihon and Og. The purpose of chapter 31 is to set out the ideal rules by which Israel was to conduct a "holy war" and how they were to distribute the spoil.

Numbers 20

The continual grumbling of Israel moves Moses to bitterness (Psalm 106:32-33). Instead of trusting God, he uses the miracle to impress the people. As a result, Moses and Aaron are not to enter the Promised Land themselves, but only see it from a distance. Aaron is the first to die and Eleazar succeeds him as high priest (20:22-end).

The King's Highway was the ancient caravan route running north and south through Palestine east of the Jordan.

Numbers 21

The story in 21:4-9 records Israel's last and most serious apostasy. Jesus recalls the incident and likens the bronze snake to the cross in John 3:14. The Israelites had simply to look at the snake; to be saved by the cross we need to look believing that Jesus' death takes away sin.

The poems of verses 14-15 and 17-18 are fragments of songs from an ancient collection, the "Book of the Wars of the Lord". Another is the "Book of Jashar" (Joshua 10:13; 1 Samuel 1:18).

The victories over Sihon and Og were Israel's first in the campaign to conquer the promised land and explain why some of the tribes actually lived east of the river Jordan. They became a subject for special remembrance and celebration (eg. Psalms 135,136).

Numbers 31

This is an idealised account of a holy war. Its purpose is vengeance for the events of Numbers 25 (31:3). The troops are specially chosen (31:4-5), the priests accompany the army (31:6), no one on the Israelite side is actually killed (31:49) and the fighting men must be ritually purified before they re-enter the camp (31:19-20).

The spoil was treated as holy and so belonged to God, and it was he who decided what to do with it. On this occasion the spoils were shared out on God's instructions; on others they were placed under "the ban" or dedicated to destruction (Numbers 18:14; 21:3). This meant that Israel were to take nothing for themselves. Everything had to be either destroyed or given to God in worship.

Day 36. Psalm 108; Numbers 22 - 25

Balaam

Psalm 108

Praise to God and prayer for his help against the nations surrounding Israel.

Numbers 22 - 24

Elsewhere in the Bible, Balaam is always depicted as a villain, although it is difficult from this story to see why. Traditionally, he is held responsible for the events of chapter 25 (see 31:16), even though the chapter itself does not say so.

The key to understanding the story is that Balaam is not a true prophet, but a diviner or soothsayer (22:7). This is the reason for the sacrifices on the high places (Joshua 13:22). For God's people, divining was a forbidden practice (Deuteronomy 18:9-13), so as a diviner called by their enemies to put a curse on Israel, Balaam was their enemy. The point of the story is that God proved stronger than the curses of a pagan soothsayer and turned them into blessing (23:23). However, it is never quite clear whether Balaam willingly co-operates with the Lord or is simply overpowered by him, hence the ambiguity throughout the story as to whether he was doing right in agreeing to go to Balak. Despite the permission granted in 22:20, it is clear that the reason Balaam wants to go is that he is tempted by Balak's offer of money. The fact that God speaks to Balaam through his donkey highlights the point that acting as God's mouthpiece by itself only puts him on the same level as the donkey. The question is whether his heart is in it, and Balaam's was not.

At first Balaam arranges the sacrifices needed for augury and tries to curse Israel, but he is overpowered by the Lord. In the end the Spirit of God comes upon him and he receives true prophecy. The speeches in 23:7-10 and 23:18-24 are diviner's oracles, whereas those in 24:3-9 and 24:15-19 are true prophesy. The openings to the two oracles describe the ecstatic condition common to the early prophets (see 1 Samuel 10:5-6,10-11). 24:17 looks ahead to the empire of David, while 24:22-24 anticipates the Assyrian empire.

Numbers 25

Traditionally, it was Balaam who advised the Moabites to tempt Israel to apostasy (Numbers 31:16). Here and in chapter 31 there is confusion as to

whether the enemies in question were Moabites or Midianites. Sexual relations (25:1) were part of the ritual worship of pagan gods.

The story explains the privileges of the descendants of Aaron through Phinehas, to whom the priesthood was exclusively reserved in the period after the return from exile in Babylon.

Day 37. Psalm 149; Numbers 26 - 27, 32 - 36

Dividing the Promised Land

Although today's passage is very long, it is possible to read much of it at speed because of the proportion of lists and other less important detail.

Psalm 149

The people of Israel praise the Lord for his care and look forward to victory over their enemies.

Numbers 26

Territory in the Promised Land was to be allocated by lot, according to the needs of each tribe (26:52-56; 33:54). The purpose of the second census, recording the numbers of each tribe at the end of forty years of wandering in the wilderness, was to find out how much land each tribe would need.

Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-end

Traditionally, land descended in the male line, but it must not pass outside the tribe. This caused a problem if a man left only daughters who married outside their tribe (36:4). The case of Zelophehad's daughters provides a model judgement for resolving such questions in the future.

Numbers 27:12-end

Moses prays for a successor and the Lord tells him to transfer his authority to Joshua (27:15-17). Although Joshua already had the Spirit and was the man designated by God, he did not have the specific authority for the task of leadership. This had to be not only passed on from Moses but acknowledged by the people.

The passage in which Moses actually sees the Promised Land and then dies is in Deuteronomy 34.

Numbers 32

Allocating the land east of the Jordan which had been won from Sihon and Og to Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh created a risk of division. The whole people must be committed to the whole of God's purpose, even if some do not benefit

directly. These tribes must not discourage the others by taking their share and refusing to take part in the battles for the rest of Canaan.

Numbers 33

This is a very late list and probably unreliable. The route from Kadesh to the plains of Moab differs from the earlier accounts in Numbers 20 and 21.

Numbers 34

This chapter records the ideal boundary of the Promised Land, which extended from Lebo-Hamath or "the entrance of Hamath" in the north to the "wadi of Egypt" in the south (1 Kings 8:65). In fact, Israel never occupied the land in the north in biblical times, even under Solomon.

Numbers 35

The towns are allotted to the Levites in Joshua 21.

Two assumptions underlie the provision of cities of refuge:

- Death by violence is extremely serious and the guilt of such a death is regarded as objective; an unexpiated crime pollutes the land (35:33-34). Because the guilt is objective, objective atonement is required in the form of the life of the one who killed.
 - Because there was no police force, the next-of-kin of the person killed was responsible for taking vengeance, not as an individual but within the law of the community. Therefore the community must arrange for the protection of someone who is objectively guilty but subjectively innocent.
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Day 38. Psalm 136; Deuteronomy 1 - 2

Retelling the Story

Psalm 136

A hymn of praise for responsive singing, recalling the Lord's mighty acts of salvation.

Deuteronomy 1 - 2

The title of the book, "Deuteronomy", is based on two Greek words and means literally, "second law." The central chapters consist of a very full and elaborate code of law which was probably in the process of formation in the years leading up to the reign of Josiah (641-609 B.C.). We will be studying chapters 5 - 26 at that stage in Israel's history. Like the rest of Israel's Law, it is placed into the mouth of Moses. The first four chapters are a historical retrospect, also in the form of a speech of Moses, telling the story of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness and developing the message of the story for a later generation. The last eight chapters are a series of appendices, emphasising the importance of the covenant with God for Israel's national life.

Israel was bound together not simply by the way of life given them in the Law but by a shared history. This shared history was essential for the unity and identity of the people. It distinguished them from the nations surrounding them as God's covenant people and taught them the reason for living by the Law. Thus, Moses' speech highlights the call to live under the Law rather than the arbitrary will of a king, mentioning the appointment of judges (1:9-18). It also draws attention to Israel's continual tendency to rebel and failure to put their trust in God, despite the goodness he had shown them.

The Lord not only controls the destiny of Israel, bringing them from Egypt into the promised land, but also the times and places of the surrounding nations (Edom, 2:5; Moab, 2:9; Ammon, 2:19; see Amos 9:7; Acts 17:26). In early times Israel believed, as the surrounding nations did, that each nation's god controlled the destiny of its own nation. Deuteronomy moves beyond this towards monotheism, the realisation that one God rules the whole of human history.

Day 39. Psalm 106; Deuteronomy 3 - 4

The Chosen People

Psalm 106

After the excerpts in earlier readings, we now look at the whole of Psalm 106, which traces the relationship between God and his people from the deliverance from Egypt onwards. After the exile in Babylon Israel remembers the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant despite their unfaithfulness and ask for deliverance.

Deuteronomy 3

Chapter 3 completes the historical retrospect which introduces Deuteronomy. One of its features is the severity of God, in particular to Moses, who despite having led the people to the borders of the Promised Land, was not able to enter it himself (3:23-27; Psalm 106:32-33).

3:11 may be explained by some standing stones in the hills of Bashan given the name, "giant's bedsteads."

Deuteronomy 4

The story of the deliverance from Egypt, God's power and faithfulness and Israel's fickleness leads to a reflection on the special relationship between God and Israel and the place of the Law in Israel's life.

1. Israel is a covenant people, bound to God by mutual obligation. The Lord is not simply one of many national gods. He decides the fates of all the nations and it is he who has displaced the Canaanites in favour of his own people (4:32-40). Thus Israel's responsibility before God to keep the Law is part of his purpose for the whole world.
2. The Law is a way of life and blessing, both in itself because it reveals the best way for the nation to live in harmony together, and because the Lord promises to bless those who keep it (4:1,40).
3. The Law distinguishes Israel from the surrounding nations (4:5-8). Their way of life is intended as a witness of the wisdom and goodness of God. This is the main reason why the Lord is so severe on Israel when they fail to keep the Law. When they abandon the Law their witness to his character becomes

a lie. The "jealousy" of God is both for his character and for the exclusive worship of Israel (4:23-24).

4. Idolatry is forbidden for several reasons: because it demeans God (4:11-20); it separates Israel from its history (4:11-12); and because the prohibition of idolatry prevents Israel from conforming to the practices of the surrounding nations (4:19).

Underlying the covenant is the mercy and grace of God, who loved the patriarchs (4:37) and who will save Israel when they call on him despite their unfaithfulness (4:29-31). God's "steadfast love" is frequently celebrated in the psalms. It is the love which is displayed in the covenant and which means that God will go on being faithful even if his people turn away from him. This aspect of God's character and dealings with Israel is brought out fully by the prophets from Hosea onwards.

Day 40. Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 27 - 28

The Blessing and the Curse

Psalm 1

The reward of obedience and the penalty of wickedness.

Deuteronomy 27

The first thing the people are to do when they enter the land is to affirm the covenant. The instructions in this chapter clearly go back a long way and may preserve a memory of what actually happened on the day Israel crossed the Jordan. The altar of stones (27:6) is a very early type of altar like that laid down in Exodus 20:24-25. In an oral culture in which few could read, the writing and setting up of the Law on stones spoke of permanence and solidity.

The curses cover all aspects of Israel's community life: their religious life, social relationships, sexual morality and inter-personal ethics. An especially important aspect is the responsibility of the whole community for the weak and underprivileged, those who cannot look after themselves.

There was a regular covenant ceremony at Shechem in early times, from which these blessings and curses may be taken (see Deuteronomy 11:26-end). Because of their different geology, Mt.Ebal, from where the curses were spoken, is a bare and barren hillside while Mt.Gerizim opposite to it is green and fertile, making it appropriate for the speaking of the blessings.

Deuteronomy 28

The covenant was to be an integral part of Israel's nationhood. To attempt to live outside the covenant would be to violate the conditions of her existence as a nation. It is not simply that God would intervene to punish. Israel's life comes directly from God within the covenant. By violating the covenant she is separated from life and on the way to death. So God warns them solemnly and at length of the consequences of deserting him.

Moreover, because Israel is bound to him by covenant, they are the ones who either uphold his honour or, by their disobedience, dishonour him. God jealously guards his honour, and having set up Israel as a witness to his character before the whole world, he will not allow that witness to become a lie.

The straightforward link between obedience and blessing, disobedience and curse, was a fundamental part of Israel's understanding of the covenant. The prosperity of the rich and successful was seen as being their reward from God for righteousness and conversely those who suffered were seen as being punished for their sins. However, in the course of Israel's history, this simple understanding was modified by other insights. Prophets, such as Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah criticised those who oppressed others for dishonest gain. The book of Job explores the problem of unexplained suffering, and Isaiah 53 introduces the idea of vicarious suffering: a righteous person bearing the punishment for another's sins.

Day 41. Psalm 81; Deuteronomy 29:1 - 31:29

Keeping the Covenant

Psalm 81

Israel is reminded of God's grace and the blessings of obedience.

Deuteronomy 29:1 - 31:29

Again, the focus is on the covenant between God and Israel, in which God pledges himself to be the God of Israel and Israel is to be his people, reflecting his character and witnessing to it on earth among the nations. On God's part, the covenant with Israel is a consequence of his faithfulness to the earlier covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (21:13) and as the covenant is reaffirmed, Moses looks both back to the patriarchs and forward to those to come, who will be born into covenant relationship with God (29:14-15).

Chapter 28, with its promise of blessing for the obedience of the whole nation and stark warning of disaster as a result of disobedience, raises some questions which these chapters begin to answer.

1. What will happen if particular individuals decide to opt out of the covenant made with the community as a whole? The answer given is that the curses threatened against the nation will fall on such people individually (29:16-21). On its own, this explanation is inadequate and later prophets, such as Ezekiel and Isaiah of Babylon had to wrestle to find a solution.
2. How can the people remain faithful to the covenant, especially in view of their tendency to be unfaithful in the past (29:4)? The answer is that the Law is not an impossible demand (30:11-14) and Israel must learn it and keep it always before them (31:9-13; see 6:4-9).
3. Nevertheless, the questions still remains, Is there a better motivation for keeping the Law than simply the promise of blessing and the threat of curse (30:15-end)? Is Israel's faithfulness to depend mainly on their fear of the consequences of failure? These chapters look beyond the promise of reward and the threat of punishment to the possibility of a real change of heart, making Israel willing to obey. Without a heart to obey, minds will be dull and ears deaf (29:4), Israel will forget the Law and even when the threatened disasters occur, they will attribute these to God's unfaithfulness rather than their own (31:15-17).

The people's attitude is basically one of stubbornness and rebellion and the gift of the Law cannot itself change this (31:19-29). The only answer is the "circumcision of the heart", so that obedience will come from a fixed inward attitude rather than the fear of external threats (30:1-10) This was the theme of Jeremiah's later prophecy, uttered at a time when he saw Jerusalem about to fall to the Babylonians because of Israel's inability to keep the covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Day 42. Deuteronomy 31:30 - 34:end

The Death of Moses

Deuteronomy 31:30 - 32:47

The "Song" of Moses is a psalm in the tradition of those like Psalms 78 and 106, reminding Israel of their past disobedience and warning them of the consequences. It takes the form of a court speech setting out the Lord's case against Israel. It begins with the summoning of witnesses (32:1-4). Then comes the statement of Israel's offence (32:5-6): like unfaithful children, they have abandoned God. When it occurs in the Old Testament, the image of God as a Father refers to the way he begets or creates his people (see Isaiah 63:16; 64:8). In 32:18 images of both fatherhood and motherhood are used for the relationship.

Next follows the "case for the prosecution", giving the evidence for the charge. This traces the origins of Israel to the wilderness, where God found them wandering and made them a nation (see also Hosea 2:3,14-15; Jeremiah 2:2). 32:8 suggests that each nation has its own god from among the heavenly beings who wait on the Lord, but Israel is his own special people. The charge is followed by the indictment (32:15-18) and threatened punishment (32:19-25). "Jeshurun" (32:15; also 33:5,26 and Isaiah 44:2) is a rare title for Israel, meaning "the upright one". Here, it is obviously used ironically.

But Israel is not left suffering the penalty for disobedience. Having punished his people, the Lord changes his mind for the sake of his own honour (32:26-27). Israel themselves do not understand what has happened, but God will nevertheless both avenge them by punishing their enemies (32:35,41-43) and have mercy on his people (32:36,39).

Underlying the Law and its requirements is the grace of God displayed in his faithfulness to the covenant. Moreover, God's grace is inextinguishable, since it does not depend on his relationship with Israel, but on his own nature.

Deuteronomy 33

A psalm of praise, celebrating the kingship of the Lord, his victory over his enemies and the prosperity of his people. Into this, the various blessings have been inserted. The blessing for Levi (33:8-11) emphasises the role of the Levites in sacrificial worship and as teachers of the Law to Israel. Simeon, which became absorbed into Judah during the monarchy, is missing from the list.

Deuteronomy 32:48-end; 34:1-end.

The death of Moses comes at the end of the five "books of Moses." He is remembered as the man of God *par excellence*, the leader through whom God rescued his people from Egypt, the judge through whom God gave the Law, the prophet who interceded for his people and with whom the Lord spoke face to face and a descendant of Levi who inaugurated the Levitical priesthood.
