Deuteronomy

Lesson #14

Moses’ Farewell Address

(29: 1 – 34: 12)
Review

As we entered Lesson #13, we found that Israel’s covenant with God carries with it both blessings and curses: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

In Lesson #13 we explored those blessing and curses, and we concluded Moses 2nd Discourse.
Preview

We begin Lesson #14 with Moses’ 3rd and final Discourse (29: 1 – 30: 20) in which he recounts what God has done for Israel, and he urges Israel to obey the covenant and to honor God in all they do.

At the conclusion of the Discourse, Moses appoints Joshua as leader of the Israelites, and he prepares to take his leave. Recall that when the Israelites reached Kadesh during the Exodus they had no water, so God told Moses to “command the rock to yield its water”; but in anger Moses “struck the rock” twice and water gushed forth. Because he had “struck” the rock, rather that “command” the rock, God forbad Moses from entering the Promised Land—a seemingly harsh judgment (Numbers 20: 2-13).

Moses will die on the east side of the Jordan River, on the mountains of Moab. But before he does, he assembles the people and delivers a stirring farewell address. He then climbs to the top of Mount Nebo, views the Promised Land from afar, and dies.
Moses’ 3rd Discourse ratifies Israel’s covenant with God, affirming that YHWH is Israel’s God and that Israel is God’s people, the terms of the covenant intact, including the blessings and curses.

The covenant applies not just to the Israelites standing on the plains of Moab, but to all future generations, as well.
“Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, You have seen with your own eyes all that the Lord did in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and to all his land, the great testings your own eyes have seen, and those great signs and wonders. But the Lord has not given you a heart to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day. I led you for forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes did not fall from you in tatters nor your sandals from your feet; it was not bread that you ate, nor wine or beer that you drank—so that you might know that I, the Lord, am your God. When you came to this place, Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, came out to engage us in battle, but we defeated them . . .
“... and took their land, and gave it as a heritage to the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Observe carefully the words of this covenant, therefore, in order that you may succeed in whatever you do.”

(29: 1-8)
When St. Paul preaches his first sermon at Pisidian Antioch on his first missionary journey in A.D. 46-48, he begins by reviewing what God has done throughout Hebrew history, and then he moves ahead to show how that history is fulfilled in Christ.

In a similar fashion, Moses begins his 3rd Discourse by reviewing what God has done in history for the Israelites, beginning with destroying Egypt and defeating Pharaoh, and then he moves ahead to how that history will affect future generations.
“You are standing today, all of you, in the presence of the Lord, your God—your tribal heads, elders, and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, and the resident alien who lives in your camp, from those who cut wood to those who draw water for you—to enter into the covenant of the Lord, your God, which the Lord, your God, is making with you today, with its curse, so that he may establish you today as his people and he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But it is not with you alone that I am making this covenant, with its curse, but with those who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord, our God, and with those who are not here with us today.”

(29: 9-14)
As we noted at the beginning of our Deuteronomy study, Moses speaks to the Israelites as if they were eyewitnesses to all of the Exodus events, but they were not! The Israelites who witnessed to plagues on Egypt were the deceased parents of those who hear Moses on the plains of Moab, and the Israelites who conquer the land of Canaan under Joshua’s leadership will be the children of those who now hear Moses.

Once again, through the use of Moses’ language, the Israelites become a collective whole, a continuum spanning countless generations: past, present and future.

As we move into Moses’ final words, his language—his words—become evermore important.
“You know that we lived in the land of Egypt and that we passed through the nations, that you too passed through and saw the loathsome things and idols of wood and stone, of gold and silver, that they possess. There may be among you a man or woman, or a clan or tribe, whose heart is now turning away from the Lord, our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; there may be among you a root bearing poison and wormwood; if any such persons, after hearing the words of this curse, should congratulate themselves, saying in their hearts, ‘I am safe, even though I walk in stubbornness of heart,’ there sweeping away moist and dry alike, the Lord will never pardon them . . .”

(29: 15-19a)
Although God’s covenant is adaptable to time, place and culture, its principles are immutable, and they must be upheld by the entire community. The secret sin of any one person—even the secret thoughts within his or her heart—affect the entire community. Such a person is like a poisonous root, a malignant growth on the tree that is Israel.

Deuteronomy stresses communal responsibility; the blessings and curses are communal in nature. But here we see that God will pounce on individuals, as well. Recall Job saying:

“What I feared overtakes me; what I dreaded comes upon me.”

(Job 3: 25)

Or Jesus’ words:

“For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”

(Luke 6: 38)
Moses continues:

“Future generations, your descendants who will rise up after you, as well as the foreigners who will come here from distant lands, when they see the calamities of this land and the ills the Lord has inflicted upon it . . .”

(29: 21)

Do you see what happened here? Moses understands clearly that the curses spoken in Deuteronomy 28 will, in fact, come upon Israel in the future! The covenant’s curses are inescapable; the wrath of God will pommel the people and they will be dumped in a foreign land, slaves to a foreign people.

The post-Babylonian perspective takes center-stage here; the destruction of the nation by Babylon is 586 B.C. is an accomplished fact.

And yet, there’s still hope:
“When all these things, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, come upon you, and you take them to heart in any of the nations where the Lord, your God, has dispersed you, and return to the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, according to all that I am commanding you today, you and your children, with your whole heart and your whole being, the Lord, your God, will restore your fortunes and will have compassion on you; he will again gather you from all the peoples where the Lord, your God, has scattered you . . . ”

(30: 1-3)
If we accept the post-Babylonian perspective here, Cyrus the Great has *already* issued the decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild (539 B.C.).

If that’s the case, what we see in Moses’ 3rd Discourse is a magnificent panegyric to God’s mercy and compassion. The people *deserved* God’s curses; they *deserved* to suffer; they *deserved* to go into captivity.

And yet, God brought them back. We understand, as we hear God’s words in Hosea:

“How could I give you up, Ephraim, or deliver you up, Israel? How could I treat you as Admah, or make you like Zeboiim? My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred.”

(11: 8)
Although we know Israel’s fate, Israel’s fate is not pre-ordained. By choice they can take the right path; by choice they can walk with God; by choice they can live blessed in the Promised land.

Moses makes that quite clear in the conclusion of his 3rd Discourse:
“See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I am giving you today, loving the Lord, your God, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and ordinances, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. If, however, your heart turns away and you do not obey, but are led astray and bow down to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to possess. I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life . . .”

(30: 15-19)
That’s a stirring call. After everything the Israelites had been through in Egypt during the Exodus and now on the plains of Moab, you would think they would choose life! And if we read the final version of Deuteronomy as a post-Babylonian work, you would think they would not make the same mistake again in A.D. 70!

Like when I ate the entire Thanksgiving turkey, burnt my tongue, and then got diarrhea for three days. I knew I shouldn’t do it, but it was good!
With the 3rd Discourse completed, Moses next appoints Joshua as his successor:
“Then Moses summoned Joshua and in the presence of all Israel said to him, ‘Be strong and steadfast, for you shall bring this people into the land which the Lord swore to their ancestors he would give them; it is you who will give them possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you; he will be with you and will never fail you or forsake you. So do not be dismayed’ . . . Then he commissioned Joshua, son of Nun, and said to him, Be strong and steadfast, for it is you who will bring the Israelites into the land which I promised them on oath. I myself will be with you.”

(31: 7-8; 23)

[This is one of 15 “pre-visualization” paintings commissioned by Cecil B. DeMille for his 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments*. Friberg received an Academy Award nomination for his work.]
“When Moses had finished writing out on a scroll the words of this law in their entirety, Moses gave the Levites who carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord this order: Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord, your God, that there it may be a witness against you. For I already know how rebellious and stiff-necked you will be. Why, even now, while I am alive among you, you have been rebels against the Lord! How much more, then, after I am dead! Assemble all your tribal elders and your officials before me, that I may speak these words for them to hear and so may call heaven and earth to witness against them . . .”

(31: 24-28)
So, Moses assembled the people and “recited the words of this song in their entirety, for the whole assembly of Israel to hear” (31: 30):
We need to pause here for a moment and consider what we are about to read: Moses’ “Farewell Address.”

Recall back in Exodus when we first met Moses, 120 years earlier, as our text tells us (34: 7). Because nearly two million Israelite slaves lived in the land of Goshen in the northwestern Nile delta, they were a security threat to the Egyptians, should invaders attack from the north along the Via Maris, the most probable attack route.
Land of Goshen

Moses' Farewell Address

Via Maris

Rameses → Succoth →
Thus, Pharaoh had ordered that all the newborn Hebrew male babies be drowned in the Nile River, for male babies grow up to be young fighting men.

Moses’ mother hid him at home for three months, but when she could no longer keep him safe, she developed a plan: she would put him in a basket coated with tar and pitch and float him down the Nile River to the exact spot where she knew that Pharaoh’s daughter bathed each day.

The plan in place, she sent her daughter, Miriam, to hide at the site, ensuring the plan’s success. And sure enough, the princess spotted the basket, had it brought to her and discovered the baby!
We read:

“Noicing the basket among the reeds, she sent her handmaid to fetch it. On opening it, she looked, and there was a baby boy crying! She was moved with pity for him and said, ‘It is one of the Hebrews’ children.’ Then his sister [appeared from hiding and] asked Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and summon a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh’s daughter answered her, ‘Go,’ So the young woman went and called the child’s mother. Pharaohs daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will pay your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son.”

(Exodus 2: 5b-10a)

Notice that Pharaoh’s daughter saw the baby crying; she didn’t hear him crying, suggesting that the baby was crying silently.
We all know the story of Moses growing up as a prince of Egypt, “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” as St. Stephen tells us in his trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7: 22).

At 40 years old, Moses killed an Egyptian slave-master, and he went on the run, as far away as possible, to the land of Midian (east of the Sinai Peninsula, in Saudi Arabia of today). There he spent another 40 years tending sheep, an abject failure in his own eyes.

When he encountered God in the burning bush at Mt. Sinai, who told him to return to Egypt and “let my people go,” Moses had five reasons why he couldn’t:
1. “But, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (3: 11);

2. “But, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what do I tell them” (3: 13”);

3. “But, suppose they do not believe me or listen to me? For they may say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” (4: 1);

4. “If you please, my Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue” (4: 10); and

5. “If you please, my Lord, send someone else!” (4: 13).
Reason #4 is the key.

That Moses is “slow of speech and tongue,” is an idiomatic expression meaning that Moses is unaccustomed to speaking, especially in matters of importance—after all, he’s been sitting on the back side of the desert for 40 years tending sheep.

We might translate the expression as: “I am a man without words,” recalling the infant Moses crying silently.

As Moses begins his “Farewell address,” he has found his voice, and his words take flight in eloquent song:
“Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth! May my teaching soak in like the rain, and my utterance drench like the dew, like a downpour upon the grass, like a shower upon the crops. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord, praise the greatness of our God!”

(32: 1-3)
Not bad for a man “without words”!

That’s for sure!
Moses’ “Farewell Address”—or the “Song of Moses”—is strikingly original. Nowhere else in Scripture are prophetic thoughts presented poetically on such a grand scale.

The Psalm’s structure resembles Psalm 78, a Psalm of Asaph, and it looks something like this:

Exordium (1-3)
Thematic introduction (4-6)
Past recounted (7-14)
Israel’s response (15-18)
God’s response (19-35)
God’s faithfulness (36-43)
Thematic Introduction

“The Rock—how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he! Yet his degenerate children have treated him basely, a twisted and crooked generation! Is this how you repay the Lord, so foolish and unwise people? Is he not your father who begot you, the one who made and established you?”

(32: 4-6)
The "Song of Moses"

Exordium (1-3)
Thematic introduction (4-6)
Past recounted (7-14)
Israel’s response (15-18)
God’s response (19-35)
God’s faithfulness (36-43)
Past Recounted

“Remember the days of old,
    consider the years of generations past.
Ask your father, he will inform you,
    your elders, they will tell you:
When the Most High allotted each nation its heritage,
    when he separated out human beings,
He set up the boundaries of the peoples
    after the number of the divine beings;
But the Lord’s portion was his people;
    his allotted share was Jacob.
He found them in the wilderness,
    a wasteland of howling desert . . .
“He shielded them, cared for them,  
guarded them as the apple of his eye.  
As an eagle incites its nestlings,  
hovering over its young,  
So he spread his wings, took them,  
bore them upon his pinions.  
The Lord alone guided them,  
no foreign god was with them.  
He had them mount the summits of the land,  
fed them the produce of its fields;  
He suckled them with honey from the crags  
and olive oil from the flinty rock;  
Butter from cows and milk from sheep,  
with the best of lambs . . .
“Bashan bulls and goats, 
with the cream of finest wheat; 
and the foaming blood of grapes you drank.”

(32: 7-14)
The “Song of Moses”

Exordium (1-3)
Thematic introduction (4-6)
Past recounted (7-14)
Israel’s response (15-18)
God’s response (19-35)
God’s faithfulness (36-43)
“So Jacob ate and was satisfied. Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you became fat and gross and gorged. They forsook the God who made them and scorned the Rock of their salvation. With strange gods they incited him, with abominations provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons, to ‘no-gods,’ to gods they had never known, Newcomers from afar, before whom your ancestors had never trembled. You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, you forgot the God who gave you birth.”

(32: 15-18)
The “Song of Moses”

Exordium (1-3)
Thematic introduction (4-6)
Past recounted (7-14)
Israel’s response (15-18)
God’s response (19-35)
God’s faithfulness (36-43)
“The Lord saw and was filled with loathing, provoked by his sons and daughters. He said, I will hide my face from them, and see what becomes of them. For they are a fickle generation, children with no loyalty in them! Since they have incited me with a ‘no-god,’ and provoked me with their empty idols, I will incite them with a ‘no-people; with a foolish nation I will provoke them. For by my wrath a fire is kindled that has raged to the depths of Sheol . . . ”
“It has consumed the earth with its yield, 
and set fire on the foundations of the mountains.
I will heap evils upon them 
and exhaust all my arrows against them;
Emaciating hunger and consuming fever 
and bitter pestilence,
And the teeth of wild beasts I will send among them, 
with the venom of reptiles gliding in the dust.
Out in the street the sword shall bereave, 
and at home the terror,
For the young man and the young woman alike, 
the nursing babe as well as the gray beard.
I said: I will make an end of them 
and blot out their name from human memory . . .
“Had I not feared the provocation by the enemy, that their foes might misunderstand
And say, ‘Our own hand won the victory;
the Lord had nothing to do with any of it.
For they are a nation devoid of reason,
having no understanding.
If they had insight they would realize this,
they would understand their end:
How could one rout a thousand,
or two put ten thousand to flight,
Unless it was because their Rock sold them,
the Lord delivered them up?
Indeed, their ‘rock’ is not like our Rock;
our enemies are fools . . .
“For their vine is from the vine of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah. Their grapes are grapes of poison, and their clusters are bitter. Their wine is the venom of serpents, the cruel poison of vipers. Is not this stored up with me, sealed up in my storehouses? Vengeance is mine and recompense, for the time they lose their footing; Because the day of their disaster is at hand and their doom is rushing upon them!”

(32: 19-35)
The “Song of Moses”

Exordium (1-3)
Thematic introduction (4-6)
Past recounted (7-14)
Israel’s response (15-18)
God’s response (19-35)
God’s faithfulness (36-43)
God’s Faithfulness

“Surely, the Lord will do justice for his people; on his servants he will have pity, When he sees their strength is gone, and neither bond nor free is left. He will say, Where are their gods, the rock in whom they took refuge, Who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their libations? Let them rise up now and help you! let them be your protection! See now that I, I alone, am he, and there is no god besides me . . .
“It is I who bring both death and life,  
I who inflict wounds and heal them,  
and from my hand no one can deliver.  
For I raise my hand to the heavens  
and will say: As surely as I live forever,  
When I sharpen my flashing sword,  
and my hand lays hold of judgment,  
With vengeance I will repay my foes  
and requite those who hate me.  
I will make my arrows drunk with blood,  
and my sword shall devour flesh—  
With the blood of the slain and the captured,  
from the long-haired heads of the enemy . . .
“Exult with him, you heavens, 
bow to him, all you divine beings!
For he will avenge the blood of his servants, 
take vengeance on his foes;
He will requite those who hate him, 
and purge his people’s land.”

(32: 36-48)
With his song sung, God tells Moses to ascend Mount Nebo:

“On that very day the Lord said to Moses, Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo in the land of Moab facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites as a possession. Then you shall die on the mountain you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and there was gathered to his people, because both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin: you did not manifest my holiness among the Israelites. You may indeed see the land from a distance, but you shall not enter that land which I am giving to the Israelites.”

(32: 48-52)
That seems awfully harsh on God’s part.

It sure does!
From our perspective it does seem harsh, but if viewed through the lens of Assyrian suzerain treaties it is the proper response: God is “King,” and Moses and Aaron are “vassals” who have disobeyed the King’s direct command. They are justly disciplined for doing so.
We should note, as well, that Deuteronomy 32: 48-52, which we just read, repeats Numbers 27: 12-14—

“The Lord said to Moses: Go up into this mountain of the Abirim range and view the land that I have given to the Israelites. When you have viewed it, you will be gathered to your people, as was Aaron your brother. For in the rebellion of the community in the wilderness of Zin you both rebelled against my order to acknowledge my holiness before them by means of water.”

Deuteronomy 32: 48-52 reaches back to Numbers 27: 12-14, linking the two, knitting Numbers and Deuteronomy into the overall fabric of the Pentateuch as a unified whole.

The literary technique is called *epanalepsis*. We most often see it used in poetry at the verse or stanza level, or at the sentence level in prose to create emphasis:

“The king is dead, long live the king!”

Here it is used at the structural level to create textual cohesion.
Next, Moses blesses the tribes, as a patriarch traditionally would bless his children in a deathbed scene, offering both blessing and wisdom, as we see Jacob do in Genesis 49.

Then Moses climbs Mount Nebo, and he dies:
“Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, the peak of Pisgah which faces Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land—Gilead, and as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim ad Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, the plain (the valley of Jericho, the City of Palms), and as far as Zoar. The Lord then said to him, This is the land about which I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over. So there, in the land of Moab, Moses, the servant of the Lord, died as the Lord had said; and he was buried opposite Beth-peor; to this day no one knows the place of his burial . . .
“... Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days, till they had completed the period of grief and mourning for Moses.”

(34: 1-8)
Memorial stone at the entrance to Mount Nebo, Jordan.

*Photography by Ana Marie Vargas*
Dr. C. and his intrepid Logos adventurers on Mount Nebo, looking toward Jericho—in the rain!

_Photography by Ana Marie Vargas_
Mount Nebo, looking south at the northern tip of the Dead Sea.

*Photography by Ana Marie Vargas*
Moses’ “Brazen Serpent” on Mount Nebo (created by Italian artist Giovanni Fantoni), looking out on the plains of Moab.

Photography by Ana Marie Vargas
We have been with Moses for a long time, now, ever since we witnessed his birth in Exodus 2. Moses is the major figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, the person through whom God delivered the message of the Law.

It is only fitting that Scripture itself writes his epitaph:

“Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and wonders the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh and all his servants and against all his land, and all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed in the sight of all Israel.”

(34: 10-12)
Questions for discussion and thought

1. What is the primary purpose of Moses’ 3rd Discourse?
2. Why does Moses choose Joshua to lead the Israelites?
3. According to Deuteronomy 31, what additional item is inside the Ark of the Covenant, besides the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the golden jar of manna and Aaron’s staff that blossomed?
4. The “Song of Moses” is similar to what Psalm?
5. Where is Moses buried?