

INTRODUCTION

Moses has finally ended his sermon and completed imparting upon the people of Israel the recitation of the law, gave final instructions for what to do with the law, and together with Joshua offered a final song for further instruction. He has performed admirably but now it is time for him to depart as God has instructed.

In verses 48-52 God directs Moses to go up to the mountain for it is time for his death. In these verses, God's instructions are straight forward and leave no ambiguity for Moses. God tells Moses that he is to climb to the height of Mount Nebo, look onto the land he has promise but not step into it. Moses is reminded that with his brother Aaron, they were unfaithful to God, therefore they shall not enter into the land but, like Aaron, will die on the mountain.

DELIMITATION

In determining this section of text for study, it seems appropriate to exclude verses 44-47 because they provide a postscript or explanatory note of the previous song of Moses. Verse 48 begins a new section with the phrase, "on that same day," which indicates a transition in thought and/or theme. This new thought includes the words spoken to Moses from God. "The Lord said to Moses, saying. . ." is follow in the next four verses, with words that God is quoted by Moses as saying. This quoted text ends at verse 52, which also brings the chapter to a close. In the first verse of chapter 33, the text moves to introduce the final blessings Moses offers Israel which does not provide any support to this study. Therefore, this paper explores verses 48 through 52 of Deuteronomy chapter 32.

TRANSLATION: DEUTERONOMY 32:48-52

⁴⁸ And God spoke to Moses that very same day saying: ⁴⁹ Go up into the Abarim mountains to Mount Nebo which is in the land of Moab across from Jericho and survey the land of Canaan which I am giving to the children of Israel as their possession. ⁵⁰ For you will die on the mountain which you ascend and there you will be gathered to your people¹ just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered by his people ⁵¹because you both² were unfaithful towards me in the midst of the children of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the desert of Zin, as you both did not maintain my holiness among the children of Israel. ⁵² Indeed, you shall look at the land before you, but you will not go into the land which I am giving to the children of Israel.

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE

God Tells Moses it is time to Die

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| A. God tells Moses to go up Mt. Nebo and see the promised land | vv. 48, 49 |
| B. God tells Moses he will die on the mountain | v. 50a |
| X. Just like his bother Aaron died on Mount Hor | v. 50b |
| B'. God tell Moses why he is to die (unfaithfulness at Meribath-Kadesh) | v. 51 |
| A'. God lets Moses see the promised land, but not enter into it | v. 52 |

¹ "Gathered by your people" is a term used at the time of death also for Abraham in Gen 25:8, Ishmael in Gen 25:17, Isaac in Gen 35:29, Jacob 49:33 as well as for Aaron in Num 20:24,26. It means that they are resting with their ancestors.

² The use of second person masculine plural for the word meaning "broke faith" would indicate that the you is more than one person. It could indicate all the people but it is more likely that since these verses name Aaron, that they are directed to Moses and Aaron specifically.

INTERPRETATION

Not only is the long forty-year journey through the wilderness coming to a close, so has Moses' long sermon reminding the Israelites of their history and the instructions for following God's commandments. Now, in chapter 32, God on "the very same day" (v.48) that Moses finishes his thirty-one chapter long sermon, Moses is commanded by God to climb Mount Nebo and take a good look at the land of Canaan before he dies. (v.49) There is some confusion if Mount Nebo and Mount Pisgah are the same mountain because both are mentioned. In chapter 3:27, God tells Moses to go up Pisgah to look all around at the land which he is being denied entry. This, however, should be understood as a separate ascent at a different time. But in 34:1, both Nebo and Pisgah are named as the location of Moses' death. From either location (if there are not the same) it is likely that Moses would have a good view of the land of Canaan, at least within the proximity of Jericho.

Moses, at the threshold of the land of Canaan which they have been promised by God for their own, is now being reminded by God that his time has come to die and for Joshua to lead the people into their new land. This is not unexpected news for Moses or the Israelites. We know this because Moses has, on multiple occasions told them that God has denied Moses entry and that he will die before they get there. In Deuteronomy 1, Moses explains that God has denied Moses along with the whole generation, entry into the promised land because the people lost faith in God -even though Moses attempted to encourage their faith. Then later in chapter 3, Moses reiterates God's anger at Moses, even as he pleaded for God to let him take the people into their promised land, God had enough and told Moses to not bring it up again. God is now (in 32:50) telling Moses that his death is imminent, but now, and for the first time in Deuteronomy, we are told that the reason for Moses' denial for entry is not due to the lack of faith of the people

Moses was leading, but because Moses himself, along with his brother Aaron sinned and did not trust God. In v. 51 God reminds Moses of the time when he and Aaron neglected to glorify God as they made water come out of the rock at Meribah-Kadesh (Num 20:1-13) and because of their act of unfaithfulness God bans them from the promised land.³

The place where Moses' (and Aaron's) act of unfaithfulness occurred is identified herein v.51 as "at the waters of *Meribah Kadesh* in the Zin desert." *Meribah* can be translated as *strife* of *quarrel* and is referring to where the people quarreled with God because they had no water. The word *Kadesh* is translated as *holy* or *sacred* and seems to refer to God's maintaining holiness in the provision of water in spite of the people's grumbling. Therefore, *Meribah Kadesh* can be translated as "God is faithful even to a quarrelsome people." It should be noted that the word *Kadesh* is used in the same verse in the piel form to say that Moses and Aaron did not maintain God's holiness.⁴ A liberal translation of these words could be: "*at the waters of the place where God was faithful even to a quarrelsome people, Moses and Aaron were unfaithful to God*".

In the last verse of chapter 32, the words of God to Moses reiterates and emphasizes the painful truth that Moses has for sure by now accepted. He may look but cannot touch. Moses has taken the people of Israel as far as he is able, and now God is calling him to die and be "gathered up by his people" as it was with his brother Aaron. This term to be "gathered up" does not mean that once Moses dies, his survivors will come and take care of his burial rights. For if that were the case, then it would contradict Deuteronomy 34:6 which claims the Lord buried Moses

³ McConville, J.G., Deuteronomy (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 5), David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, eds. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. p. 460

⁴ Botterweck, Ringgren, Fabry eds., Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol. XII. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI. pp. 529-531

and no one knew the location. What should be understood in the term, “gathered up to his people” is that once one dies, the ancestors that have died before and dwelling in Sheol, bring his spirit to the underworld.⁵

The particular language and phrasing used in chapter 32:48-52 seems to be more consistent with the Priestly source material than with the Deuteronomistic source. It also parallels themes found in the book of Numbers which is attributed to the Priestly writers. Some of the source inconsistencies that can be identified in this section of Deuteronomy include the location of Aaron’s death. In Deut 10:6 the location is at Moserah, and in 32:50 the place of Aaron’s death is Mount Hor which is consistent with Numbers 20:28. Jeffrey Tigay lists a number of other priestly source phrasings that are inserted into this section of Deuteronomy that varies significantly the rest of Deuteronomy. Because of these variants, it seems evident that this material was taken largely from the Book of Numbers and most likely inserted by later editors. This insertion creates a connection and seems to attempt offering some clarity to the death of Moses that is linked to Numbers.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

It seems rather harsh that Moses was denied entry into the promised land because of one stated infraction in which Moses does not give God the due respect and glory for the flow of water from the rock and therefore he (and Aaron) are denied their place in the land to come. At least this is the main reasoning identified in Deuteronomy 32:51. Whether Moses is excluded

⁵ Tigay, Jeffrey, The JPS Torah Commentary, Deuteronomy, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA. p.317 and Christensen, Duane L., Word Biblical Commentary Volume 6B Deuteronomy 21:10-32:12. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN. p.827

because of his own sin or, as expressed in earlier verses in Deuteronomy, the sins of the people, it seems that God was being extraordinarily hard on Moses. God called Moses to lead the people out of slavery and into a new land but in the midst of the journey, God's chosen people were unable to live in faithful obedience and fear of the God who delivered them. God realizes that it is better to let this lot of teeth-gnashers and complainers to wander around in the wilderness until the new generation are ready to take the lead. Moses realizes that even though he was unfaithful to God, he is still called to prepare the people and bring them to the promised land. God still has good work for Moses to do and gives him what he needs to accomplish God's task. Even as Moses recognizes that he will not enter into the new promised land, he is faithful to God, trains his successor and brings them to the threshold of a new life.

People of faith and leaders in the church especially are called to move the community of believers into a new life and commitment to God. It is a long journey and one that has continued over many generations. What we can learn from Moses is that in all that we do, we must be focused on God's will for us, and as we witness God's mighty works, even those that God chooses to do through us, all glorification must be attributed to God-self. Even though Moses understood his time was limited, he still fulfilled his ministry and brought the people to the threshold to the promised land. We may not get to see the end results of our ministries, but we can trust that God will always bring new leaders to continue the journey toward the new realm of glory for all creation.