

Parashah One Hundred Fifty-One

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 2:1-4; 1Peter 1:22-25

notes by Tim Hegg

In this, the final *parashah* of Deuteronomy, and thus the last reading of the Torah, we have both an ending and a beginning. We read of the death of Moses and the transfer of his authority as leader of the people of Israel to Joshua. Thus, one era of our history ends, and a new era begins. In a similar fashion, the reading of the Torah ends but the cycle starts over again with Genesis, for we are never finished studying the Torah. Reading the last *parashah* signals the blessing of beginning again, which is why following the reading of the final *parashah* in Deuteronomy, we always read the first verse of Genesis. In this way we remind ourselves that the blessing of the Torah is not that we ever finish reading and studying it, but that by God's grace we are always enabled to read and study it again, for it is the eternal word of God to us, infinite in its wisdom and boundless in its revelation of God and His ways.

It is easy to see why the Sages chose Is 2:1-4 as the *haftarah* for the final reading of the Torah, for there Isaiah prophesies of the last days when "the Torah will go forth from Zion." In other words, the Torah remains throughout the generations of Israel, and in the Messianic age, it remains the foundational teaching given to the nations who come to Jerusalem seeking Israel's God.

We have likewise chosen 1Peter 1:22-25 to accompany the final Torah *parashah* because here Peter quotes Is 40:6-8 which proclaims: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." In other words, the Torah, as the word of God, is eternal and remains forever.

In this last section of Deuteronomy, Moses ascends the heights of Mt. Nebo, to the top of Pisqah, and Adonai shows him all of the land promised to the fathers. Mt. Nebo is probably one of the peaks of the Abarim (cf. 32:49), the mountain range east of the Dead Sea. According to 32:47-49, one of the encampments of Israel was "the heights of Abarim, before *the city of Nebo*." Thus, Moses would have travelled about a day's journey to retrace the steps of Israel to ascend these heights for a view of the whole Land.

Verse 1 of our *parashah* indicates that Moses was shown the Land "from Gilead as far as Dan." Gilead is the transjordan region captured from Sihon and Og in the initial conquest, and the language here appears to say that this region is also part of the Land promised to the Fathers. Dan is the city of the Danites at the northern end of the Galilee, at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

In vv. 2-3, further designations of the Land are given. Naphtali is the northern region of the Galil, north and northwest of the Sea of Galilee (the Kinneret). The "Western Sea" is the Mediterranean Sea, and the Negev is

the southern region of the Land, here most likely the northern regions of this expanse. The “plain of the valley of Jericho” refers to the entire Jordan Valley, including the Dead Sea at one end, and the Sea of Galilee at the other, and is probably the same as that which Josephus calls the “great plain” (*War* 4.452–56). The southern extremity of the “plain” is noted as the city of Zoar, which was located south or southeast of the Dead Sea, and may indicate the southeastern boundary of the Land. It would appear that these geographical designations are more general than specific, giving us the sense that Moses saw the wide expanses of the Land, but not giving us definite, clear boundary markers.

We may ask initially what the purpose was for showing Moses the Land. It could seem a bit harsh to display before him the wonderful Land that was to be the inheritance of Israel while at the same time reminding him that he will not be allowed to enter it! It might seem a bit like showing candy to a child only to deny him the right to have any. But this is not the case at all. For Moses had well learned the lesson that *God’s promise is equal to His doing*. If God has promised something, it is as certain as if He had already accomplished it. We may rest upon His promises as though they have already been accomplished, for they most certainly will be. Thus, for Moses to see the Land that God promised to the fathers makes its possession just as certain as if he had personally entered it with the others. The eyes of faith lay hold of what God has promised.

The author of Hebrews makes this interesting point:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Messiah greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. (Heb 11:24–26)

Note that he says of Moses: “for he was looking to the reward.” What is this reward upon which Moses put his hopes? Apparently it was far more than the hope of leaving Egypt, of traversing the desert, and even of entering the Land. For the author of Hebrews gives us a glimpse into the revelation that had been given to Moses. He considered “the reproach of Messiah greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.” Moses had been given the picture of the coming Messiah! Moses, by faith, had received the promise of dwelling in the Land that far exceeded the initial conquest, that went beyond the monarchy and divided monarchy, and even beyond the exile. By faith, Moses identified himself with the suffering Messiah and with the glory that would follow. Indeed, Moses must have understood by faith that he would, one day, dwell in the Land with the reigning Messiah, and the event of the transfiguration, when Moses appeared on the mountain with Elijah and the glorified Messiah, was an early manifestation of this.

In this regard it is interesting to note that in our *parashah*, Moses is called עֶבֶד־יְהוָה, 'eved Adonai, "the servant of Adonai." It is this designation that becomes the common way of referring to Moses throughout the book of Joshua, and eventually, Joshua himself is called "the servant of Adonai" as well (Josh 24:29; Judges 2:8). Likewise, the nation of Israel is so designated by Isaiah (42:19, cf. 41:8; 44:1) as is David (in the titles of Ps 18 and 36). Ultimately, in Isaiah's prophecy, the Servant of the Lord, "My Servant" is the Messiah Who suffers for the transgressions of His people and is glorified in the success of His work (Is 52:13; 53:11). Thus, Moses, who is first designated as "the servant of Adonai," stands as a foreshadow of the Messiah Himself, Who would die and only later, upon His return, gather His people to the Land where He would dwell as their reigning Redeemer.

Our *parashah* tells us that "Moses the servant of Adonai died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Adonai." The days of his life, like our own, are numbered by the Almighty. He apportions to each one life according to His wise and immutable plan. The Hebrew text reads literally "according to the mouth of Adonai" and so the rabbinic midrash accredits Moses' death to God's kiss (Mid. Rab. *Deut* xi.10). In a similar fashion, it was by the providence of God that Yeshua was also betrayed to His death by a kiss (cf. Matt 26:47-49)).

And then we read "And He (Adonai) buried him in the valley in the land of Moab" (v. 6). God removed the body of Moses from the mountain where everyone knew he had gone to die, in order to keep his burial place a secret. For had the people known where Moses was buried, they may have made it into a shrine and thus Moses' grave would have been used in an idolatrous way. Sadly, we see often in the history of religions that prominent individuals are "deified" and their graves used as locations for idolatrous worship.

The fact that God Himself cares for the body of Moses, and buries it, should stand as a clear example to us of how we should care for the body after death. Burial is an exercise of our faith in the coming resurrection, and a demonstration of our belief that God is the creator of the body which is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14). God's handiwork is therefore to be carefully guarded and not desecrated. In the deep sorrow we experience in the passing of our loved ones, we nonetheless commit their bodies to the ground in hope of the resurrection, and in doing so, we honor the One Who created them in the first place, Who planted faith within them, and who will once again recreate the body, uniting it with the soul, never again to experience the pains of death. "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, resurrector of the dead."

Our *parashah* ends with the notice that Joshua the son of Nun was endowed with wisdom. This appointment of Joshua to take up the leadership of Israel after Moses' passing is directly related to the fact that Moses had ordained him for this position because Moses had "laid (סָמַח, *samach*)

his hands upon him” (v. 9). In rabbinic tradition, the “laying on of hands” became the ceremony for rabbinic ordination, called “S’michah” from the same verb. Here we have “*l’dor v’dor*,” “from generation to generation” demonstrated. But we see that this passing the truth from generation to generation has two sides. Not only had Moses prepared Joshua for the task of leading the people, but the people were also willing to accept Joshua’s leadership: “and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as Adonai had commanded Moses” (v. 9). Joshua had “big shoes” to fill! In spite of the fact that the people had often grumbled against Moses, in the end he was held in highest regard. The only way that they could have submitted to Joshua was if they did so knowing that God had likewise “ordained” him to his duties. Submission to leaders is ultimately submission to God.

Finally, the notice is given (no doubt written by someone other than Moses) that “since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom Adonai knew face to face” (v. 10). We do not know who wrote this, nor the time that it was written. But we should note carefully that the text does not say “never will a prophet arise in Israel like Moses,” but only that up to the time of the writer’s day, no such prophet had arisen. Joshua was given the position of leadership that Moses had occupied, but Moses was still unique. His “face to face” encounters with the Almighty and the proliferation of miracles which he had performed were not matched by Joshua. This unique status of Moses is clearly the work of God, not Moses himself, for the text says “whom Adonai knew face to face.” The force of the word “know” in this case is covenantal, describing the intimate relationship that comes through covenant partnership. God “knew” Moses in the sense that God had chosen him as the one through whom the Torah should be delivered to Israel. As such, he stood as the first of the prophets (Moses is only called a “prophet” here in all of the Torah) and thus as the exemplar for all the prophets who would follow.

It is no doubt this emphasis upon the unique status of Moses that underlies the purpose of the Apostles as they wrote the Apostolic Scriptures, to cast Yeshua as the “new Moses,” not in the sense so often found in Christian commentaries, that Yeshua *replaced* Moses, but in the sense that in Yeshua, “one like Moses” had arisen in Israel, in that He came from the very presence of the Father (“face to face”) in order to reveal the Father in truth. Thus, in the prologue to John’s gospel, we read: “For the Torah was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Yeshua Messiah” (Jn 1:17). Similarly, Paul relates the glory that was shining in the face of Moses when he descended from Mt. Sinai, and also writes of Yeshua: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Messiah” (cf. 2Cor 3:7f; 4:6). Indeed, One has arisen in Israel Who is not only like Moses, but Who has surpassed him in every way. This One, Yeshua, is the very One of whom Moses Himself spoke (Lk 24:27).