

shall have no other gods") stands side by side with ("in addition to"—29:1) the Moab covenant's emphasis on the saving activity of *God* ("The LORD will vindicate his people . . . when he sees that their power is gone"). Human responsibility for obedience is held together with God's creation of obedience within the people (30:6). The two simultaneous covenants—the law of Horeb and the mercy of Moab—involve a theological dynamic that cannot be fully captured or reduced into a single logical formulation. Deuteronomy says as much when it affirms, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us . . . to observe all the words of this *torah*" (29:29).

When we turn to consider the second major understanding of Moses' death as self-giving compassion for the sake of the people, an interesting shift occurs in Deuteronomy. The strong spotlight on *Moses'* self-giving death outside the land and intercession for the people (Deut. 1:37; 3:26; 4:21; 9:19-21, 25-29; 10:10) begins to fade into the background in the Moab covenant. Moses' function is taken over by the action of *God's* mercy and compassion. God will work not in and through a single individual (Moses) but in and through the liturgy of a worshiping community, a text, a song, other human leaders, nations, and all creation. Moses' death atoned for the rebellion of the old wilderness generation and allowed a new generation to enter the land of Canaan (Deut. 1:37). But now as Moses dies and the future begins to invade the present, God works in new ways to create new relationships and new possibilities for God's people.

## CHAPTER 8

### "This Is the Blessing"— Deuteronomy 33-34: God's Blessing, Moses' Death

"The LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you."

—Deut. 23:5

He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life, incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it is a human life.

—Franz Kafka<sup>1</sup>

The book of Deuteronomy ends with Moses' prayer of blessing for the community of Israel (chap. 33) and the death and burial of Moses outside the promised land (chap. 34). At the end of his days, Moses is portrayed as letting go of his leadership, his power, and his life. He hands it over to God and a new generation to carry on with the story of God's people. These concluding chapters form an appropriate inclusio with the opening chapter of Deuteronomy around the theme of the inevitable rise and fall of human power and the need ultimately to trust God as Israel encounters the future. In Deuteronomy 1, Moses had given up his exclusive leadership and shared power with others, just as he does in Deuteronomy 34. Moses had recounted the spy story when an earlier generation of Israelites had refused to trust God's power and promise (1:19-45). The old generation had thus died outside the land, a death that Moses now shares at the end of Deuteronomy. But God had promised that a new generation would enter the land of promise (cf. 1:34-40). Thus, the beginning and end of Deuteronomy join

1. Franz Kafka, *Diararies 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1965), 195-96.

together in affirming the limits of human capacities and powers, the need for human community, and the ultimate faithfulness of God, who transcends the limits of space, time, and human death to carry forward the story of God's people.

#### DEUTERONOMY 33: MOSES' PRAYER FOR GOD'S BLESSING

The act of prayer is a confession of human limitations. Intercessory prayer requests God to work in and through humans and creation to accomplish what humans alone cannot do. Moses has done all that he can do, and he must finally lay down his life and trust God to carry on with the future and to fulfill the powerful words of blessing that he speaks. Thus, Moses "the man of God" turned to God in prayer and "blessed the Israelites before his death" (Deut. 33:1).

Moses' blessing of the twelve tribes of Israel consists of an introductory and concluding framework (33:2-3, 5 and 33:26-29, respectively), which surrounds a catalog of specific blessings for each of the twelve tribes of Israel (33:6-25). The framework in verses 2-3, 5 and 26-29 was likely an older independent psalm of praise that celebrated the kingship and victory of God. Much of the framework's imagery seems to derive from Canaanite divine warrior language: the "shining forth" of the god from Seir or Sinai (v. 2), the heavenly army of "holy ones" (vv. 2-3), and the god who "rides through the heavens" (v. 26).<sup>2</sup> The psalm celebrating the victory of the divine warrior has been taken over, applied to Yahweh, and edited with the addition of verse 4 (see below) and the insertion of individual blessings of the Israelite tribes (vv. 6-25). Many of the tribal blessings may themselves be quite ancient in origin. This editing of the Divine Warrior hymn has redirected its meaning from a poem about the power of military might to a poem about the power of teaching the *torah* as a nonviolent but aggressive strategy to continue the blessing of the people of God from one generation to the next.

The *introduction* in 33:2-5 portrays Yahweh's march with a divine army from the holy mountain. The mountain is given three different names: Sinai, Seir, and Paran. The mention of Mount Sinai immediately links this scene with that recorded in Exodus 19-20; Deuteronomy elsewhere always calls this mount Horeb. In its present context in the Pentateuch, this Divine Warrior march is thus associated not so

2. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, HSM 5 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 77-78. Similar imagery is found in Judg. 5:4-5; Ps. 68:7-8; 104:3; Hab. 3:3-4.

much with a military victory but with a giving of the *torah* at Mount Sinai or Horeb. Most scholars agree that 33:4 has been secondarily added to the introduction, but it serves to strengthen the association of the Divine Warrior image with the giving of the *torah* at Mount Horeb: "Moses charged us with the *torah*." The *torah*, a term designating the catechism of Deuteronomy and later extended to the whole Pentateuch, becomes the weapon of the Divine Warrior. The violent militarism of the Canaanite gods is transformed into the powerful teaching of Yahweh through *torah*.

The last verse of the introduction (33:5) may have one of two meanings. The celebration of the rise of "a king in Jeshurun [an alternate name for Israel]" may refer either to the sovereign power of Yahweh as monarch or to the rise of a human king in Israel. In either case, Deuteronomy upholds the ultimate supremacy of Yahweh over all powers. Although the king may be a legitimate institutional channel of God's authority and care of the community, the human king of Israel remained subject to Yahweh as a student and servant of the book of the *torah* (17:18-20).

The *tribal blessings* of 33:6-25 echo other biblical scenes where a dying parent pronounces final blessings upon his children (Genesis 27; 48-49). The Song of Moses had ended with a general promise about the vindication of God's people (Deut. 32:36, 43). The blessings in this next chapter give concrete expression and form to this vindication, providing specific and individual blessings to each of the tribes. The blessings given here involve down-to-earth realities in the life of the community: survival, family, security, land, fertility, vocation, government, economics, worship, and the teaching of *torah*. The blessings mirror the subject matter of the statutes and ordinances of chapters 12-28 and entrust them not to human obedience alone but to the work of God in and through ordinary communities of people, families, governments, politics, and economics. The last word of Moses and the Moab covenant is not a little blessing and much curse as in the Horeb material (chap. 28). Rather, chapter 33 declares that full blessing is God's final will for God's people.

The list of blessings begins with the tribe of Reuben (33:6). Reuben is the firstborn of the sons of Jacob and thus at the head of the list of tribes here and in most other tribal lists (Gen. 49:1-3; Num. 1:5).<sup>3</sup> The

3. The sequence of the Israelite tribes in Deuteronomy 33 is unique when compared to the various other lists of the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 49; Numbers 1 and 26; etc.). The order of tribes here seems to follow a roughly geographical pattern combined with other reasons for priority. Reuben from east of the Jordan is the firstborn and thus named first. Next is Judah, the tribe that ascended to supremacy through Jerusalem and

dwindling number and strength within the tribe of Reuben is foreseen. Reuben here may function as a forerunner of Israel as a whole in exile. Reuben lies on the east side of the Jordan, not technically in the land of Canaan. Reuben's "numbers are few," perhaps mirroring the exiles' sense of powerlessness and loss of numbers. Moses' prayer that "Reuben live, and not die out" is a prayer that the exiles may well have applied to Israel as a whole. Part of God's blessing is simply the survival of the people in the face of overwhelming disaster and death.

The blessing of Judah appears to reflect a time in Israel's history when Judah was isolated from the rest of the community of Israelite tribes. The prayer asks that Yahweh bring Judah back to God's people and strengthen him against his adversaries (Deut. 33:7). God's blessing here strengthens the uniting bonds of the community of Israel. Each tribe builds up and strengthens the whole people (Psalm 133).

The blessing of Levi is the most important and distinctive of all the tribal blessings. Throughout Deuteronomy, the Levites are set apart and dedicated to a unique calling as sacrificial priests (18:1-8; 33:10), as preachers (27:9-26), carriers of the tradition (31:24-25), and teachers of *torah* (33:10). The Levites are that part of the community of Israel who have no inheritance except the LORD, who are not tied to land and economic interests, who live solely in dependence on the community as a witness to Israel's sole dependence on Yahweh. The calling of the Levites even extends to the renunciation of family and kinship ties (33:9). The Levites teach and guide the community, whether in the ancient form of oracles through the Thummim and Urim (cf. Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8) or through the "word," the "covenant," the "ordinances" or the "*torah*" contained in the Mosaic book of the *torah*. Part of the blessing of the community is a group dedicated to interpreting God's will and proclaiming, teaching, and offering sacrifices for the sake of the community.

The last verse of the Levi blessing, Deut. 33:11, has violent and militaristic overtones. The image of the violent defeat of enemies is

the Davidic line. The priestly tribe of Levi has a prominent role in Deuteronomy as priests and teachers of *torah* and thus is named third. Benjamin and Joseph as the beloved sons of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:22-24; 35:11-26) are named next. The extravagant blessing given to Joseph (and thereby Ephraim and Manasseh—Deut. 33:17) may reflect the origins of the Deuteronomic tradition in northern Israel, where the Joseph or Ephraimite tribe was often dominant. The sequence of the rest of the tribes seems to follow a counterclockwise geographical ordering of tribes as they settled in the land of Canaan. Simeon has dropped out of the list completely. For a discussion of the relationships of the various twelve-tribe lists in the Pentateuch, see my *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New*, BJS 71 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 55-70.

sometimes perceived as incongruous in relation to the preceding images of Levi as nonviolent priests and teachers. Thus, some have argued that verse 11 is misplaced and ought to be attached to the blessing of Judah (v. 7).<sup>4</sup> But the transformation from the power of militarism to the power of teaching *torah* is part of the development of the biblical traditions associated with the tribe of Levi. In an earlier setting very similar to the blessing of Moses just before his death, the ancestor Jacob "blessed" Levi by denouncing the Levites for their "weapons of violence" (Gen. 49:5-7):

Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,  
and their wrath, for it is cruel!  
I will divide them in Jacob,  
and scatter them in Israel. (Gen. 49:7)

The Levites were known for their capacity for militaristic violence and revenge in earlier pentateuchal traditions (cf. Gen. 34:25-31). But in the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy, the Levites are called to channel their militaristic energy into preaching, sacrificing, and teaching *torah*. The language of militarism and adversaries is retained. But the one who "crushes the loins of his adversaries" is shifted from Levi to the LORD (Deut. 33:11). Moreover, the arena is radically changed: the war rages on now not so much on the battlefield as in the classroom and religious assembly. The weapons are no longer chariots and spears but *torah* and the words of God.

A similar transfer from militaristic languages to the language of teaching and obeying *torah* is evident in the use of the formula "Be strong and courageous" as it occurs in Deuteronomy 31 and Joshua 1. The phrase has its origins in ancient Near Eastern and biblical exhortations in preparation for warfare. This militaristic context is evident when Moses encourages the Israelites in Deut. 31:4-6 concerning the upcoming military conquest of Canaan: "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them." Michael Fishbane observes that this same militaristic formula

is repeated a second time by YHWH to Joshua at the onset of the conquest (Josh. 1:5-6, 9). On this second occurrence, however, an entirely new dimension is added: for encased within the old military exhortation formula (in vv. 6, 9) is a piece of aggadic theologizing where Joshua is told to "be strong and of good courage" *in obeying the Torah*, since only in this manner will he succeed in his great

4. An example is A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, NCBC (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 404.

adventure (vv. 7-8). . . . Thus, the language of a military order has been reformulated as an injunction to obey the Torah.<sup>5</sup>

As with the blessing of the Levites in Deut. 33:8-11 and the introductory frame in 33:2-5, the language of violent militarism has been transformed into the nonviolent but powerful medium of worship, teaching, and obeying *torah*. The blessing of God includes those in the community who seek to be fully devoted to the interpretation and teaching of the tradition in the context of the worship life of the community.

The blessing of Benjamin, the youngest and most beloved of Jacob's twelve sons, surrounds the tribe with Yahweh's love so that it "rests in safety . . . all day long" (33:12). Blessing is the ability to let go, lean back, and rest in the security of divine care.

The lavish blessing of Joseph (33:13-17) is the most extravagant of all the tribes. The blessing overflows with pictures of fruitful land, fertility, descendants, power, and prosperity. The gifts of nature, "the choice gifts of the earth and its fullness," are featured in the Joseph blessing. As in every other part of Deuteronomy, the world of nature and creation form a crucial element of the interrelations of God, humans, and nature. Blessing includes all the gifts of creation.

The blessings of Zebulun and Issachar (33:18-19) seem to reflect their respective vocations with Zebulun as a seafaring tribe ("in your going out . . . they suck the affluence of the seas" and Issachar as land-based farmers ("in your tents . . . they suck . . . the hidden treasures of the sand"). Part of God's blessing is the daily work of commerce, farming, and production.

The blessing of Gad reflects a time when Gad was a leader among the tribes. Government and leadership has its privileges but also its heavy responsibilities of justice and obedience to God (33:21). The meaning of the blessing of Dan is obscure, perhaps referring to Dan as the northernmost outpost of Israel and its function in the military defense of the land. Naphtali and Asher are blessed with prosperity, favor, and security.

All in all, the blessings of the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33 make quite specific requests about how the vindication and compassion of Yahweh promised in chapter 32 should be worked out in the life of the Israelite community. The blessing constitutes Moses' last will and testament to Israel before his death.

The blessing of Moses ends with the concluding framework (33:26-29), which continues with the imagery of the divine warrior. But the

5. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 384, 546.

content of the blessings has transformed the warrior God into a God who works primarily in and through the weapons of *torah*, worship, and words. This reconstituted warrior language will lead Israel to victory over its enemies and to the blessings of life, safety, and prosperity. The pastoral images of "a land of grain and wine, where the heavens drop down dew" return to the expectations of a pastoral poem in the Song of Moses in chapter 32 (cf. 31:20; 32:1-2). Moses prays in chapter 33 that the seemingly antipastoral Song of Moses become again a pastoral, a poem about the assured blessings of Yahweh in spite of the rebellions of the people. Moses' prayers to God on behalf of the people had been effective before (9:25 – 10:5), and so Moses leaves with his people his most powerful legacy, his words of blessing and hope:

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,  
a people saved by the LORD,  
the shield of your help,  
and the sword of your triumph! (33:29)

Blessing, promise, and hope are the last words of Moses to Israel.

#### DEUTERONOMY 34: THE DEATH OF MOSES OUTSIDE THE LAND

The lavish images of happy blessing and victory in Deuteronomy 33 pulsate with life and hope in the face of an open future. Combined with this chapter of blessing is chapter 34, the poignant scene of the death and burial of Moses before he reached his life's goal of setting foot in the promised land. The blessing is promised but not achieved. The end has arrived, but the goal has not been reached. What is the meaning of Moses' death in this last chapter of Deuteronomy?

Recall that the present form of Deuteronomy has understood the significance of Moses' death in various ways. Earlier in Deuteronomy, the motif of Moses' death outside the land in some way opened up the possibility for the hope and life to the rest of Israel promised in chapter 33. Moses would die because of the people's sin (1:37; 3:26; 4:21). A new generation of Israelites would enter the land of promise because of his death, a land into which he could not go. But Deuteronomy makes clear that Moses does not die as a substitute. He does not die instead of the people but rather ahead of them. The structure of the new Moab covenant (chaps. 29-32) moves from God's merciful election of Israel through God's judgment and finally to God's vindication and saving of the people. Like Moses, this community of Israel will experience its own suffering and judgment. But Moses' death in some

way contributes to the possibility that Yahweh will ultimately restore the community after it has passed through the trauma of an exilic death.

A later editor of Deuteronomy (perhaps a Priestly or later Deuteronomic redactor) had explained Moses' death as the result not of the people's sin but of his own human failure. Moses had once "broken faith" at Meribath-kadesh (Deut. 32:48-52). Moses had failed to maintain God's holiness and thus joined the ranks of rebellious Israel against God. Moses in this view was a sinner and rebel like the others, if only for one brief lapse of faith.

Interestingly, the account of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34 does not mention either of these two prior explanations for the meaning of Moses' death. As such, chapter 34 provides a third and crucial stage in Deuteronomy's reflection on Moses' death that affects and redirects one's reading of the whole book. A close reading of the chapter helps one see where Deuteronomy finally wishes to leave the reader. My reading of Deuteronomy 34 divides into three parts: verses 1-6—Moses' survey, death, and burial; verses 7-9—Moses' vigor, the people's mourning, and Joshua's leadership; verses 10-12—Moses' unique power and relationship to Yahweh.

#### DEUT. 34:1-6: MOSES' SURVEY, DEATH, AND BURIAL

In their present form, these verses are largely the product of a later Deuteronomistic writer or editor.<sup>6</sup> The scene is a fulfillment of the LORD's statement in 3:27 and 4:22—Yahweh tells Moses that he will see the land but die before actually setting foot on its soil. Standing on Mount Nebo across the Jordan River from Jericho, Yahweh shows Moses the promised land from its northern extremity in Dan to the southern reaches of the Negeb (34:1-3). God reaffirms the continuing validity of the pentateuchal promise of the land to the ancestors ("to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob"). But the promise remains for Moses only a distant sight, not an actualized fulfillment: "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there" (34:4).

Moses then dies in the land of Moab "at the LORD's command." Moses' demise is not a natural death but a premature and divinely imposed limit on Moses' life. The Hebrew text reports that "he

6. For example, Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15, 2d ed. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 28, 60; and Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 411. Mayes argues that the references in v. 1 to "the plains of Moab" and "Mount Nebo" are Priestly additions to the otherwise Deuteronomistic section. They may also be post-Deuteronomic additions by a redactor who was editing the entire Pentateuch. The same may be true of the references to "Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" in v. 4.

[Yahweh] buried him [Moses] . . . but no one knows his burial place to this day" (34:6). God returns Moses back to the dust from which God originally created all humans (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). Moses' burial place is hidden and thus unable to become the site of a shrine or cult of a dead human ancestor, a practice strictly forbidden by Deuteronomy's own laws (Deut. 14:1; 18:11; 26:14). Moses is not a god but a "servant of the LORD," an honored title but clearly distinguished from the divine majesty of Yahweh, who alone is to be worshiped.

This last chapter of Deuteronomy makes no attempt to explain or to rationalize Moses' death. Moses' death is not presented as an atoning sacrifice, a precursor of the people's judgment, or punishment for Moses' own sin. The reader no longer hears Moses begging God to let him enter the promised land (Deut. 3:23-26). The straightforward narration of Moses' death without explanation simply underscores the inevitable reality of human death and limitation. The text allows the mystery of human suffering and death to remain unanswered. After Moses "went up" to Mount Nebo, Yahweh takes over the action of the verbs—showing, speaking, commanding, and burying. The only action that Moses does is "die." This section of chapter 34 is in tune with the emphasis of the Moab covenant in chapters 29-32, stressing the priority of divine over human action.

#### DEUT. 34:7-9: MOSES' VIGOR, THE PEOPLE'S MOURNING, AND JOSHUA'S LEADERSHIP

A Priestly or later Deuteronomistic editor has probably added verses 7-9 as a supplement to 34:1-6.<sup>7</sup> The verses begin by noting that Moses died at the age of 120 years, a long human life but not an exception in the biblical tradition (e.g., cf. Gen. 25:7; 47:28; 50:26). But at 120, Moses remains exceptionally strong and healthy: "His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated" (Deut. 34:7). Unlike the ancestor Isaac, whose eyes were dim in his old age (Gen. 27:1), Moses is able to see clearly the land that God has showed him. Moreover, Moses' "vigor" remains strong. The word for "vigor" is rare in Hebrew

7. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 413. The reason Mayes and others trace these verses to the Priestly redactor is their correspondence to Priestly material about Aaron's death and Joshua's succession in Num. 20:29 and 27:18-23. Moreover, the reference to Moses' "vigor" seems to conflict with the Deuteronomic note in Deut. 31:2 that characterizes Moses as feeble in his old age, thus suggesting it may be from a different hand. In a thorough treatment of the question, Lothar Perlitt ("Priesterschrift im Deuteronomium?" ZAW 100 [Supplement 1988]: 65-88) argues against any traces of a Priestly source in Deuteronomy. Perlitt would attribute these allegedly Priestly texts to a Deuteronomic editor who knew the Priestly material and worked it into the final form of Deuteronomy.

but is associated with the fresh, moist property of young trees and fresh fruit. At 120, Moses remains strong, young, and supple. These claims about Moses' extraordinary strength and youthfulness are common legendary motifs associated with heroes in ancient literature.<sup>8</sup> This heroic depiction of Moses seems to contradict the portrait of Moses as feeble and weak in Deut. 31:2: "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about." While the contradiction may be explained away as coming from two different sources, their presence together in the final form of Deuteronomy suggests a meaningful tension in the portraiture of Moses. Moses is heroic and legendary and at the same time subject to the limits and weaknesses of all human beings. This same dialectic is at work in the juxtaposition of the stress on the inevitable reality of Moses' death on the one hand (34:1-6) and on the undiminished vigor and sight of heroic Moses on the other (34:7).

The section continues in 34:8-9 with the people's mourning of Moses for thirty days, the usual period for mourning the dead. This period of mourning marks the transition from one stage in life to another (21:13). The weeping and anguish lasts for a month and "then the period of mourning for Moses was ended" (34:8). Respect is granted to Moses, but the yearning for the days of his unparalleled leadership must end and give way to a new generation, new leadership, and new struggles. Thus, Joshua takes over as leader of the community of Israel: "the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses" (34:9). Joshua is not an exact and full replica of Moses. He has the "spirit of wisdom" because Moses laid his hands on him, but Joshua does not have the spirit of Moses himself. Joshua does not lead as Moses did according to his own personal interpretation or meditation of God's words. Rather, Joshua leads according to the Mosaic interpretation of God's commands and words now recorded in the book of the *torah* (cf. Josh. 1:7-8). In the transfer of leadership recounted earlier in Num. 27:12-23, God instructed Moses concerning Joshua, "You shall give him *some* of your authority," meaning presumably not all of it.<sup>9</sup> Joshua is a legitimate leader of Israel but not of the same stature as Moses.

8. George W. Coats, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," *CBO* 39 (1977): 34-44. Cf. also idem, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOTSup 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

9. Coats, "Legendary Motifs," 37.

#### DEUT. 34:10-12: MOSES' UNIQUE POWER AND RELATIONSHIP TO YAHWEH

This text is commonly thought to be one of the latest additions to the Pentateuch, and its language affirms the absolute incomparability of Moses as a "prophet" of God (34:10). The uniqueness of Moses stems in part from his unparalleled intimate relationship with Yahweh; Moses was one "whom the LORD knew face to face." To "know" another person in Hebrew denotes an intimate relationship. To know "face to face" pushes the level of intimacy even higher, straining to express near parity or equality. A similar expression of the closeness of God and Moses occurs in Exod. 33:11, where God speaks to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend."<sup>10</sup> The prophet Jeremiah as a new prophet like Moses (cf. Deut. 18:15) is perhaps the closest analogue to the uniquely intimate relationship of God and a human prophet (Jer. 1:5; 12:3). Nevertheless, Moses stands out as the prophet par excellence, without equal or rival.

Moses' uniqueness derives not only from his intimate relationship to Yahweh but also from his unmatched powerful "signs and wonders" done in Egypt and "all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power" that Moses did for all Israel (Deut. 34:11-12). What is truly remarkable here is that these words ("signs and wonders," "mighty deeds . . . terrifying displays of power") are technical terms applied consistently in Deuteronomy to *Yahweh* alone (4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:3; 26:8; 29:3). Yet in the end these powerful deeds of saving Israel are attributed to Moses.

One could simply dismiss this shift of subject from Yahweh to Moses as an editorial addition and thus dissolve the seeming tension between attributing "signs and wonders" to Yahweh and then to Moses. But the text is profoundly meaningful if one takes seriously its role in the movement of the entire book of Deuteronomy and in the context of chapter 34. Deuteronomy has moved from the past story of God's faithful actions (chaps. 1-4) to the present and near future commandments and laws directing human activity and life (chaps. 6-28) to the new covenant of Moab, which returns to the theme of God's faithful actions to save and to vindicate a rebellious Israel (chaps. 29-32). It is *God's* faithfulness and action that stand at the beginning and end of the life of the community. What role then do the law and human obedience

10. The motif of the shining face of Moses and the necessity of the veil in the book of Exodus reflects this same uniquely close encounter and relationship with God that sets Moses apart from the rest of the community (cf. Exod. 34:29-35). The episode in Numbers 12 likewise affirms Moses' uniqueness as a prophet or mediator of God's word (Num. 12:8).

play in the light of consistent human rebellion and the need for God's undeserved mercy? The concluding paragraph of chapter 34 responds to these questions by affirming Moses' crucial role as the human agent of divine activity. Moses and Yahweh are virtually identified in functional terms. Moses' life and words are remembered in retrospect as mediating the very words and actions of God. Human life and obedience can embody the real presence of God in the world. The blessing in chapter 33 is *God's* blessing, but it is mediated through the *human* words of Moses.

Yet it is clear in the context of Deuteronomy that Moses must join the fate of all humanity in sin and death. Moses was not God during his lifetime, nor can he become an ancestral god to be worshiped in his death (34:6). Moses will die outside the promised land because of the people's sin (3:26), because of his own failure (32:51), and because death is simply the undeniable fate of all humans (34:5). But as a servant of God, Moses has been a vehicle for redemptive, healing, and saving actions that will open the future for the sake of others. Human gifts and achievements are affirmed even as the inevitability of limits and failures is acknowledged. Life and death, sacrifice and tragedy, heroic accomplishments and deeds, unfulfilled hopes and dreams—these are the ultimate components of the realistic mixture of human struggle and divine purpose that make this last scene in Deuteronomy one of the most moving in all of Scripture.

#### SUMMARY: DEUTERONOMY 33-34 AND THE DEATH OF MOSES

The relationship of these last two chapters to the Deuteronomic theme of the death of Moses is self-evident and requires little additional explication. Chapter 34 narrates the actual account of Moses' death, a climactic and bittersweet end toward which Deuteronomy has been building from its opening chapter. But an important nuance has been added to the theme of Moses' death. The mourning over the human mortality of Moses (34:8) joins with the celebration of the wondrous and profound ways in which God has used Moses to guide and save the people of God. As Moses draws his last breath on Mount Nebo with the vision of the promised land still alive in his eyes, the tragic and the noble intermingle. Moses' life is a life whose end is too soon but whose legacy lingers on in a text which is still read and a song which is still sung across the ages among "us, who are all of us here alive today."

One modern embodiment of the realistic and empowering hope modeled by Moses was a person who sought a day when all God's

children would be free together. One night, after recounting how he had seen glimpses of God's will being worked out as black Americans in Selma, Birmingham, and Memphis began to take their places in a society that was not willing to acknowledge that place, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the threats made against his life:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now—because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live . . . but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will, and God's allowed me to go up to the mountain. I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

Within a week of speaking those words, he was dead. But Martin Luther King, Jr., was ready. In simple things like people taking different seats on buses or garbage collectors standing up for their rightful dignity, King had been to the mountain. He knew God would one day overcome. Moses, King, and countless other faithful servants of God have had visions of an end they would not see. But the little bit they tasted gave them courage to carry on with their life and work. They trusted that God would work in and through their lives, and they knew God would continue to work to bless and save long after they were gone. Deuteronomy calls its readers "today" to a similar vocation of working and hoping for the promised land, knowing that its accomplishment will finally be God's doing, not theirs. In this way, Deuteronomy proclaims the limits of human law and the triumph of divine love.

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,  
a people saved by the LORD,  
the shield of your help,  
and the sword of your triumph! (33:29)

11. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 286.