

The Song of Moses

Deut. 31:30-34:12

1. Deuteronomy 31:30–32:4

³⁰ *Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song until they were ended:*

³² *“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.*

² *Let my teaching drop as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
As raindrops on the tender herb,
And as showers on the grass.*

³ *For I proclaim the name of the LORD:
Ascribe greatness to our God.*

⁴ *He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
For all His ways are justice,
A God of truth and without injustice;
Righteous and upright is He.*

This particular portion of the Pentateuch gives us Moses’ final word, a sermon or speech to the people whom God had placed him over as leader. He was, of course, the brother of Aaron and Miriam and was the one whom God had used both to lead Israel out of the land of Egypt and as deliverer of the 10 commandments. He was responsible for many other things and a great amount of what positive Israel did on their way to the Promised Land. He is often referred to as the Law Giver because it was to him whom God spoke to deliver the Laws for Israel to live by. God, Himself, inscribed the commandment on the tablets of stone, but Moses heard and published a good many of the others. He was also responsible for many of the miracles God used to protect and to provide for Israel in their time in the wilderness.

Just to set this “song” in its’ context, we should note that Moses has just finished the written law and delivered it to the Levites to be deposited in the ark. He has just been told of his coming death. God has told him that the Israelites will not be faithful and will break the Covenant God had made with them. Specifically, they will “...forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them.”

It is interesting that God defines their failure as both forsaking Him AND forsaking the covenant God had made with them. “forsake” refers to the idea of “abandonment” and is used in the OT referring to both the fact that Israel abandoned God and that God, in response, abandoned them. It uses the same word in both senses. Jeremiah comments on the abandonment in Jeremiah 2:13:

¹³ *“For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

The first part of the verse charges Israel with abandonment of their God, the One Who had be a source of life to them, and, second, they had hewn or cut out for themselves other “water carriers” or cisterns. The implication of the word “cistern” is that of a thing that carries human waste. Rather than taking their needed water from a ready source that would produce good, clean and cold water, they were content with just dipping that which was tainted with human waste in the well and using that to drink from. God’s response is quite understandable. Not only were they refusing to take what He had provide, but they were deliberately disobedient and pursued their own, filthy solution (and then sought to obey and worship in that impure state). Additionally, the cisterns they were seeking to use couldn’t even hold water!

Back in Deuteronomy, God goes on in what He says to Moses concerning what Israel would do and His response to it...

¹⁷ *Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’* ¹⁸ *And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods. (Deuteronomy 31:17–18)*

Now, one would think that such a warning, given from God, by means of a Prophet of the stature of Moses, would carry a lot of weight and move the people in a profitable and obedient direction after the warning was given and they had time to think it through. But it definitely did not.

Almost as a postscript to this warning comes God’s command to Moses to deliver the song that we have begun to consider. We ought not be surprised, given Moses’ nature and what he is presented to be, that he immediately moved to do as God commanded:

¹⁹ *“Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel.*

²² *Therefore Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the children of Israel. (Deuteronomy 31:19 & 22)*

Notice that it isn’t a matter of Moses just delivering the message, but he wrote it down and “taught it” to the children of Israel. We are then told in verse 30 that he spoke it in the hearing of all the people:

³⁰ *Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song until they were ended: (Deuteronomy 31:30)*

One of those interesting things pops up with the word “spoke”. Of course it can refer to the use of the vocal capacity to deliver meaning to hearers. But, interestingly (and I’m NOT making this up), it can refer to the rods or braces that connect the hub to the rim of a wheel. It used thus, for instance, over in 1 Kings 7:33:

³³ *The workmanship of the wheels was like the workmanship of a chariot wheel; their axle pins, their rims, **their spokes**, and their hubs were all of cast bronze.*

That is exactly the same word we are considering. The use as a verb occurs some 1040 times in the OT, with use as a noun (referring to spokes in a wheel) very, very few times. The only way I can connect the two is to see the act of speak on the part of an individual as that which holds communication or conversation together and makes the intention of the speakers clear and meaningful.

We can certainly see the verbal use here in Deut. 31:30. Moses “spoke” to all of the children of Israel who were gathered together to hear. To tie both meanings together we might think along the line that his speaking of the content that God had told him to speak served to join Israel and their life and conduct together with their Lord and Master and to, at least intentionally, give them that which would serve to bind and support them (the rim) together to their God (the hub). I know this seems a bit abstract, but it is interesting and seems, of a sort, to make sense and is instructional.

We can take this idea home to our own lives as well. Just as Israel received instruction and urging from God to hear and obey His Word given via Moses, His Prophet; so also we experience that same revelation, in the form of His Word, and ought to hear it and obey it, in all of its’ parts, being obedient, completely obedient to its’ commands as we walk with Him day by day. That will give to use the sturdy base upon which build our functional ability as believers.

One more brief note before we move on: It specifically says that Moses spoke the words of this song “...until they were ended.” ‘Ended’ refers to the ending or completing of a thing that (obviously) was not finished until the statement in view. Here, we see that God communicated a message to Moses, who then, in turn spoke that message to the assembled people, making sure that none of it was left out. Completeness is the sense here, especially when talking about the spoken word.

Given that this is a prophetic, poetic song (or message) on Moses’ part, it is significant and essential to seek to understand it in all of its’ contents’ meaning.

³⁰ *Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song until they were ended: (Deuteronomy 31:30)*

He preached (or spoke/instructed) while he had their attention, from beginning until he was finished; or more properly, until the message God intended for him to deliver was finished. It is essential that we see the context intended by the telling us that Moses spoke the contents of the message of God to the people. This “message” was going to end up in the Ark of the Covenant and we know a significant part of it to have been the Law of God itself. Included, generally speaking, were the Table of the Law, and all of the rest that is said, through Leviticus and Deuteronomy to be the “official” Law of God.

All of that is placed on scroll by Moses and then read to the people of God as they stood to recognize its’ official and binding nature upon them. Here in Chapter 31, we see the account of Moses bringing to fruition the command of God, earlier, to both write it and read it to God’s people. Also, there is an addendum in Chapter 32 that scholars consider the “official” Song of Moses.

A. Deuteronomy 32:1ff

*³² “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”*

The command to write down the song and to teach it to Israel and have them sing it (v.19) is said to have been obeyed (v.22). This is now made more explicit as an introduction to the song itself. The Hebrew word behind “recite” (*dābar*) has a very wide semantic spread. But because the writing of the song has already been mentioned, because it was recounted from the beginning to end, and because it was to be taught to the Israelites, the use of the word “recite” describes well what Moses did before the whole assembly.

It is interesting that Moses uses two different but related words to instruct Israel in how he desired the to interact with what he was about to say. He wants the “give ear” or to pay attention, listen to it and pay serious attention to it. Further, further in the next phrase, he tells them to “hear”, a word that speaks of seeing to it that you have taken in the real and true meaning of what was said.

*³² “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”*

We cannot make either the heavens in the first phrase, or the earth in the second more important than the other. The two of them together do not mean that he is speaking to either one directly. In fact, he is using the two of them as a picture of his real desire, that is, that together they must be heard and taken in as the important thing that they are. Just as, if one could speak directly to the heavens and then directly to the earth, it would speak of the importance of what was being said, so also the use of the two as a unit speaks very eloquently of the extreme significance of what he is saying. Notice that he kind of, in both phrases the importance of what he will say first and only then does he actually give the direction to listen.

“Speaking” talks of the general act itself. It says that there is a “speech” coming and that it is important. Second, “the words of my mouth” underscores that all of the words, in particular, are important in their parts. They must listen to all of the speech, and also listen the particular words that are a part of the speech for their significance.

We have knowledge of this kind of thing as well. We listen to a speaker and we also pay attention the particulars of exactly what he is saying. One can speak a great, long speech and, in the case of many speakers, not say much at all. But others, speaking for some brief amount of time, can say a great deal by means of the individual words he says. That is basically the idea here.

It is not that Moses necessarily had great skills as a public speaker. But rather, every little bit of what he would say was important and Israel needed to give not just their attention to the general speech given, but to concentrate on all that he said, in its’ specifics and seek to understand their import and impact on their lives and the future of the nation. This was Gods’ intention and it needed to be observed.

B. Deuteronomy 32:2

*² Let my teaching drop as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
As raindrops on the tender herb,
And as showers on the grass.*

In verse 2 he uses more figures of speech to show what he intends his teaching to be like.

1. Dropping like the rain means that, like rain, he intends it to be thorough and well spread. Rain falls on a widespread area and wets everything that it touches. It also doesn’t depend on the ground (or trees or grass, etc.) to reach out and take it in. All it has to do is be in the area and not be shielded and the rain will fall upon it. The intent is that those to whom Moses’ teaching is delivered might be essentially the same - it will fall on everyone present and be soaked up by all that it falls upon.
2. The point meant by referring to “distill as the dew” is to point to the fact that dew is pure and trustworthy. It is clear and clean. But more so is that the word “distill” refers to the way that the dew is everywhere in the morning. The can be understood to speak of a flood, a stream, or that which is poured out. Dew is just there when it gets light in the morning.
3. In the third phrase he makes reference to the raindrops that gently fall on a “tender herb”. The specific reference to “rain drops” speaks of the gently falling rain that does no harm to what it falls upon.
4. The last phrase refers to “showers on the grass”. It is the showers falling that gives the grass what is necessary for it to grow.

All of these are speaking of the intention Moses had for how his teaching would go forth and how it would be received by those to whom he was teaching.