



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Moses' memoirs

The Hebrew title of the book of Deuteronomy is *Devarim*, 'words.' What 'words'? The opening verse tells us that these are the farewell speeches of Moses to the people of Israel as they stand on the plains of Moab, ready to make their final journey, across the Jordan River, to enter the Promised Land. They will make this journey without Moses who prepares to die as the Lord foretold (Num. 27:13).

The midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) makes an interesting observation. The Book of Deuteronomy opens with: "*These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel...*" The midrash¹ notes that Moses, here at the end of his mission, is a man of words, a fluent speaker. Yet at the outset of his calling he said to the Lord, "*I am slow of speech*" (Exodus 4:10). Ponder this detail. Was Moses just being humble about his verbal abilities, or did he grow into his calling as prophet?

In the opening chapters of Deuteronomy we find Moses reviewing the travels of the Israelites from Mt Sinai. The events he recounts—the establishment of leaders, the sin of the spies, encounters with foreign nations—have already been told in the books of Exodus and Numbers. Now Deuteronomy records Moses' memoirs in 1:5 – 3:11. Do you notice anything unusual?

If you have been following the stories of the Israelites through the desert, you will notice some interesting discrepancies in Moses' retelling. Moses' recall of events is not identical to the stories told earlier. E.g., here, the appointment of leaders is presented as Moses' idea rather than that of his father-in-law, Jethro (cf. Exodus 18:17f.); here, God bars Moses from the Promised Land because of the spies' sin rather than Moses' actions (cf. Numbers 20:12); here, the battles against Sichon and Og were divinely pre-ordained victories rather than unplanned occurrences (cf. Numbers 32).

What is going on? Something very ancient, very Jewish, and embedded also in our own Christian tradition: the ongoing interpretation of the biblical text. The Word of God is not a dead letter to be studied like a petrified fossil; it is a living Word that speaks 'heart to heart' and is received afresh by each new generation of believers. And how early this process of interpretation begins: we see it occurring here within the biblical text itself!

What else can we glean from Moses' memoirs? He tells and interprets events for a reason. This is not self-indulgent reminiscing; this is a leader preparing his people, a younger generation which has no memories of their parents' slavery, for the next critical stage of nationhood. What vital lessons are

being taught at this point? What aspects of the journey would you highlight, if you were Moses?

Some contemporary Torah commentators explore a psychological profile of Moses, likening his struggles to those of parenthood. He is a great leader, yes, but also a flawed human being struggling to come to grips with the past forty years and his hopes and dreams for his children, even blaming them as a projection of his own unresolved issues. Our Torah portion reveals a profound *I-Thou* relationship between Moses and the Israelites (note the repetition of the word 'you' punctuating his speech); yet it is a relationship laden with conflict and alienation as much as intimacy. As a parent, pastor or community leader, can you relate to Moses' sacrifices, heroism, weaknesses and struggles?

Reflection:

We are considering Moses' final words. Have you ever been with someone who was close to death and who shared some final words with you? If you had a short time to live, what words would you most wish to speak, and to whom?

1. Midrash Rabbah Devarim 1.7

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008), p.1058; Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Deuteronomy* (London/NY, 1983); Rav David Silverberg's parashah commentary: www.vbm-torah.org/archive/intparsha/devarim/44-62devarim.doc.